

A Consciousness-Raising Approach to Pragmatics Teaching: Web-based Tasks for Training Study-Abroad Students (以网络任务型方式提高留学项目学生的语用意识)

Chunhong Teng
(滕春红)

Fei Fei
(费飞)

Michigan State University
(密歇根州立大学)

tengc@msu.edu

feifei@msu.edu

Abstract: This study examines whether web-based self-access materials developed with a pragmatics focus can help pre-study-abroad participants increase their pragmatic awareness in Chinese. Twenty-four students participated in the study and took pre- and post-tests. Half were pre-study-abroad participants that worked through the web-based pragmatics program while the remainder, non-study-abroad participants, did not. Prior to the study, both groups were given a pre-test to assess their pragmatic skills. The experimental group worked through a six-unit, web-based pragmatics program during a course of two months before they went abroad. At the end of two months, both groups took the post-test. The results showed that the experimental group scored significantly higher in the post-test than the control group. Although both groups of students improved on certain speech acts (request, appreciation, refusal, complaints), the experimental group outperformed the control group on almost every speech act category. The results suggest that the web-based pragmatics program could be used to aid students in the acquisition of Chinese pragmatic features and prepare them for their Chinese study-abroad program.

提要: 本文针对学生是否能通过网络中文语用学习辅助教材来提高语用意识进行了实验研究。24名学生参加了此项研究, 完成了实验前、后的测试, 其中实验组的12名学生在赴华留学前两个月, 自主完成了六个单元的在线学习课程; 而控制组的12名学生则没有。在开始网络学习之前, 两组学生都参加了实验前测试, 两个月以后, 又参加了实验后试。实验结果表明, 尽管实验组和控制组的学生在语用意识上都有不同程度的进步, 但实验组的后试分数远高于控制组的学生。此结果显示网络中文语用学习辅助教材有助于学生提高语用意识, 进而为留学中国做好了一定准备。

Keywords: web-based program, Chinese pragmatics, speech acts, study-abroad program

关键词：网络学习教材，中文语用，语言行为，留学项目

1. Introduction

Pragmatics is the study that explores the ability of language users to match utterances with contexts in which they are appropriate (Bardovi-Harlig & Manhan-Taylor, 2003). In order to express their intended meaning successfully, language users must have knowledge of how, when, and with whom they are communicating, in addition to what they intend to convey. As an essential part of foreign language education, pragmatics competence requires students to develop the ability to use the target language to interact appropriately with others in a wide range of social contexts. However, foreign language educators and researchers have noted that even with a considerable amount of vocabulary and sufficient knowledge of the grammar in the target language, learners of a foreign language tend to have difficulty understanding the intended meaning of a speech act and fail in producing speech acts using appropriate language and strategies, often leading to serious pragmatic failure (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996).

As language teachers, we are all aware that some Chinese pragmatic features are substantially different from those of English. For example, native Chinese speakers usually do not accept compliments readily when given. They either reject or deflect them to show their humbleness. Therefore, for language learners, the acquisition of Chinese requires the development of cultural as well as linguistic communicative competencies. Research has further demonstrated that certain Chinese pragmatic features are difficult to master for native English-speaking learners of Chinese (Ji, 2000; Kasper & Zhang, 1995; Ma, 1996; Yu, 2003; Sun, 2004). For instance, Hong (1997) found that request making in Chinese is hard for learners even after two years of Chinese instruction at college level in the United States. With an increasing number of students now choosing to study abroad in China, it is important that research provides empirical evidence on how pragmatics instruction in Chinese can be enhanced.

1.1 Background Information

The Chinese study-abroad program in China at the author's institution, first held in summer 2002, offers eight weeks of intensive language instruction and cultural exposure via tutorial activities and weekend excursions. Students have classroom instruction in the morning and one-on-one tutoring in the afternoon. Overall, the study-abroad program seeks to maximize exposure to the language environment to help students acquire Chinese proficiency, pragmatic competence and increase cultural awareness. However, students are not returning with upper-level (intermediate or higher) pragmatic competence. Thus, we felt a need to teach pragmatics explicitly to students to raise their awareness of Chinese pragmatic features prior to their departure and to investigate whether the teaching of pragmatics before studying abroad will facilitate greater competence.

For the working definition, pragmatic awareness is comparable to consciousness in both noticing and understanding the target language forms by the learners. This definition also includes two aspects of the pragmatic knowledge, namely, pragmatic forms and strategies. Language forms, also known as formulas in pragmatic research (usually in the form of contextualized and routinized chunks) correspond with pragmalinguistic norms (Kasper & Rose, 1999); while pragmatic strategies (for example, direct vs. indirect politeness strategies) mainly refer to sociopragmatic approaches, that is, when, why, and with whom to use the various forms in intercultural communication.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

In the recent decade, there have been a growing number of studies exploring how pragmatic instruction can help learners to be more pragmatically appropriate (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005; Kasper & Rose, 1999; Rose & Kasper, 2001; Winke & Teng, 2010). Such research has demonstrated that students benefit a great deal from instruction that includes strong pragmatic components. One way to foster the development of pragmatics is through studying abroad, which provides learners with the most direct pragmatic encounters and learning experiences. However, research has also indicated that short-term immersion programs cannot be assumed to create automatic cultural and language leaning (Wilkinson, 1998). It is necessary to provide pragmatic instruction on speech acts before students go abroad to help them maximize their study-abroad experience (Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi & Lassegard, 2002). In light of this need, language educators and researchers have developed various ways of teaching pragmatics. For example, Winke and Teng (2010) used “task-based tutorials” to help students learn Chinese pragmatics features in the study-abroad context. Roever (2004, 2006) proposed that web-based pragmatics programs represent psychological reality that is most similar to what learners would encounter in real-time communication (e.g., live or online chatting). Web-based self-access materials have been proven to be useful, especially in cases where there is not sufficient time for explicit pragmatic instruction in the classrooms (Sykes & Cohen, 2007). However, currently there is no web-based program specifically about Chinese pragmatics. In addition, no study has been conducted on the effect of such a web-based program with a focus on pragmatic instruction in foreign language settings where learners do not have many opportunities to interact with native speakers of the target language.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The current study explores the efficacy of using self-access materials in a web-based pragmatics program to raise students’ Chinese pragmatic awareness, which is defined as learners’ conscious and explicit knowledge to use appropriate language forms and strategies to realize different speech acts in contextualized situations.

The main interest of the study is to examine whether the web-based pragmatics program’s intervention could be used as a supplement to enhance teaching of Chinese pragmatics. In addition, we are interested in exploring which pragmatic feature is most



likely to be taught successfully using a web-based program that we developed with a pragmatics focus.

2. Instructional Design of Web-based Pragmatics Program

The goal of designing the program is to draw students' attention to the differences in terms of pragmatic features between Chinese and English before they embark on a study-abroad program. We hope that by raising their awareness, students will have an enhanced ability to practice these features upon arrival in China while interacting with native speakers in authentic situations, observing and practicing different speech acts.

The web-based program was designed based on early research on Chinese pragmatics, which identify the differences in pragmatic formulas and strategies between Chinese and English. Such research studied the characteristics of Chinese speech acts, such as compliments, requests, refusals and responses to compliments (Chen, Ye & Zhang, 1995; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996; Ye, 1995; Zhang, 1995). The project was partially funded by Office of China Programs and Asian Studies Center at Michigan State University in the United States. Developed with technical assistance from the university Language Learning Center, and with the help of teaching assistants from the Chinese program, the researchers were responsible for developing the program content, which consists of six units with different themes, such as greetings and compliments, shopping, bargaining and dining out the Chinese way. These scenarios are representative of potential situations in which the learners may find themselves and require the learners to accomplish communicative acts, such as encounters with professors, university personnel, other students, friends, roommates, and service personnel. These themes and the web links of the six units in the program are listed in Appendix A. (Any potential user can choose his/her own login information and type it in for access.)

In the web-based program that we developed, there are 10 to 15 authentic pragmatic scenarios per unit (under each theme), which require the students to identify pragmatic formulas and use a variety of speech acts, such as greetings, compliments, responses to compliments, politeness strategies, requests, refusals, etc. Three exercise types are employed for the scenarios in each unit: multiple-choice tests (hereafter MCTs), drag-and-drop items, and discourse-completion tasks (hereafter DCTs). DCTs, often described as written oral plays, present a description of a situation (or a scenario) and ask the participant to respond. The instruction and the item prompts are written in English but the audio recordings are in Chinese. The test items are both in Chinese characters and Pinyin Romanization.

Below are examples of the MCT and DCT from Unit 3 and 4 of the web-based pragmatics program. The icon  indicates that students can click and listen to the corresponding audio recordings. This icon  means that students can click and record their own answers and then play to hear their own voice.


An example of multiple-choice task:

You can't meet the deadline for a term paper and want to ask your professor for an extension. Which of the following is/are acceptable? (Note: There might be more than one answer for this situation. Choose all you think are appropriate.)

- A Lǎoshi, wǒ néng bù néng wǎn jǐtiān jiāo? 老师，我能不能晚几天交？
 B Lǎoshi, wǒ wǎn jǐtiān jiāo, xíng bù xíng? 老师，我晚几天交，行不行？
 C Lǎoshi, wǒ hái yào jǐtiān shíjiān cái néng xiě wán. 老师，我还要几天时间才能写完。
 D Lǎoshi, wǒ zhè jǐtiān bìng le. Wǒ hòutiān jiāo, xíng ma? 老师，我这几天病了。我后天交，行吗？

An example of sentence completion task:

Your roommate was talking loudly with his/her friends in the dorm. You had to study for tomorrow's quiz but you couldn't concentrate because of the noise. (Note: You can record your answers as many times as you feel comfortable. The instructor will only hear your last submitted recording.)

You:  _____ xiǎo diǎnr shēng shuōhuà ma?

你们能小点声儿说话吗？

Your roommate: Zěnmē la?

怎么啦？

You:  _____.

Your roommate: Bù hǎo yì sī. Nà wǒmen chūqù shuō ba.

不好意思。那我们出去说话吧。

As has been mentioned earlier, pragmatic awareness in the present study is defined as the learners' use of pragmatic formulas and strategies to realize different speech acts. Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) pointed out that DCTs assess learners' ability to compute contextual factors and assemble relevant linguistic information. Items in both MCTs and DCTs direct learners' attention to use pragmatic formulas and strategies by asking them to engage with simulated dialogues in meaningful contexts. The program also offers students access to the audio recording of each scenario. Students can listen to choices, choose answers in the MCTs, and record their own answers orally in the DCTs rather than having to write down the answers. In addition to a vocabulary list, the web-based program also provides built-in feedback. Furthermore, linguistic and cultural notes will be displayed when students finish all the items in each unit to enhance their noticing of pragmatics features.

To sum up, the goal of the web-based program is to raise students' pragmatic awareness before embarking on a study-abroad program; while abroad we want them to practice those pragmatic features with like-aged native tutors. We hope that by raising

their awareness, students will have a clear focus to continue practicing these features while interacting with native speakers in authentic situations. Therefore, the current study seeks to find out whether the web-based pragmatics program could be used to help students in the acquisition of Chinese pragmatic features and prepare them for their Chinese study- abroad program.

3. Experimental design

3.1 Participants

The study was conducted with two groups of students. Twelve future study-abroad participants of first- and second-year Chinese at Michigan State University volunteered as an experimental group, which completed both pre- and post-tests as well as the web-based program. In addition to the twelve study-abroad students, twelve students who did not study abroad participated as a control group. Students ranged in age from 19 to 22 and had studied either one year or two years of college-level Chinese. First- and second-year students are equally numbered in the experimental and control groups.

3.2 Research questions

1. Is there any statistical significance between the experimental and control groups in the pre- and post-tests?
2. Specifically, what speech act category has been improved as a result of the web-based instructional intervention?
3. Can web-based self-access materials developed with a Chinese pragmatics focus increase pre-study-abroad participants' pragmatics awareness?

3.3 Method

Prior to the web-based pragmatic instruction, both groups were given a pre-test. The web-based pragmatics program was made available to the experimental group two months prior to their departure. In addition to their regular Chinese class workload, the participants in the experimental group were encouraged to work through the six units in the web-based pragmatics program during the course of the two months. The control group only attended their regular Chinese class and did not use the web-based program. It took participants approximately 30 minutes to an hour to complete each of the 6 units, for a total of 3-6 hours of self-access with the website. For the experimental group, the teacher regularly checked students' progress with the program and offered encouragement to finish it. At the conclusion of the study period, the experimental and control groups were given a post-test using another pragmatics test. The test was scored by two native speakers of Chinese using a rubric delineating a 4-point scale of 0 to 4. Scores were based on grammatical accuracy in terms of the pragmatic formulas being

used and pragmatic appropriateness in terms of pragmatic strategies being employed. After the completion of the program, participants took part in an email survey reviewing their experience.

3.4 Assessment tools

The pre- and post-tests were adapted from the items of a pragmatics test developed by Winke and Teng (2010). Participants were asked to finish the tests within 50-minute class time. Both pre- and post-tests consist of 12 scenarios as DCT. Test items in the pre-and post-tests are different though they focus on similar speech acts. The speech acts being tested include refusal, appreciation, complaint, bargaining, response to compliment and request. Specifically, the use of pragmatic formulas and strategies to realize different speech acts was the focus. Below are two sample test items from both the pre-and post-tests:

Instruction: First, read the description in English to understand each situation. Second, read the conversation in Chinese to complete each dialogue as appropriately as you can. To be appropriate, you might consider what a native speaker would say to address a particular situation. You can use Chinese characters, pinyin or both.

Situation 1: Compliment on your Chinese skills (from the pre-test)

A Chinese you just met tells you that your Chinese is very good. What do you say?

Chinese: 你是从哪儿来的?
Nǐ shì cóng nǎr lái de?

You: 我是从美国来的。
Wǒ shì cóng měiguó lái de。

Chinese: 真的啊? 你的中文说得真好。
Zhēn de ā? Nǐ de zhōngwén shuō de zhēn hǎo。

You: _____

Situation 2: Asking your professor for help (from the post-test)

You go to your professor's office to ask a few questions regarding your homework. What would you say to your professor?

Your professor: (On hearing a knock at the door) 请进。
You: 您好, 老师。 _____
Nín hǎo, lǎo shī 。 _____

When you are done asking, what would you say?

You: _____

4. Outcome

4.1 Research question 1: Is there any statistical significance between the experimental and control groups in the pre- and post-tests?

Mean scores on the pre- and post-test of both groups of participants were analyzed and compared. Although there is no significant difference between the two groups on the pre-test, the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group in the post-test. The results reveal evidence of learning outcomes. As both groups performed better on the post-test, the experimental group had significantly more gains than the control group.

4.2 Research question 2: Specifically, what speech act category has been improved as a result of the web-based instructional intervention?

We examined the mean scores on each test item of both groups of participants, and summarized the differences in terms of speech acts. In general, participants in the experimental group scored higher on almost every speech act category, except for bargaining, in the post-test than they did in the pre-test. Both groups of students' scores increased for speech acts of refusal, appreciation and complaint, but the experimental group outperformed the control group significantly on request.

4.3 Research question 3: Can web-based self-access materials developed with a Chinese pragmatics focus increase pre-study abroad participants' pragmatics awareness?

Written data collected from the post-test DCTs showed that learners' responses varied in terms of linguistic features, some of which are appropriate and some are less appropriate. When judging appropriateness of students' responses, we draw upon results from previous research on Chinese pragmatics as well as the two raters' judgments. Interestingly, learners who employed appropriate pragmatic strategies showed a higher accuracy rate in using pragmatic formulas. On the other hand, learners employing correct pragmatic formulas might not necessarily use appropriate pragmatic strategies to perform certain speech acts. For example, Chinese pragmatic formulas used for responses to compliments are unique in how the praised person shows extreme modesty by saying, "Please don't mention it." or "I don't deserve that." When bargaining, the Chinese speaker tends to show little or no interest in buying by saying, "That's too expensive. I don't want it."

Strategies involved in successful speech acts of refusals, complaints and requests are more complex. For example, in a scenario that requires participants to perform the speech act of refusal, almost all participants (both in the experimental and control groups) were able to use the pragmatic formula "I'm sorry" correctly in Chinese. However, a pragmatically appropriate way to express refusal in Chinese requires more than a pragmatic formula. The speaker needs to state the reason why he or she must refuse, followed by offering a future opportunity (a "sweetener") to reduce the directness and offensiveness of the refusal such as, "Can I join you next week?" However, a close

examination of the qualitative data reveals that the experimental group differed from the control group on the speech act of request. For example, there are two scenarios that require participants to employ the speech act of request in the post-test. One scenario is between two friends, and another is between a professor and a student. Although both scenarios ask for the speech act of request, the professor-student scenario is different from the one between friends because of the more formal relationship between professor and student. The request is also more face-threatening, which poses difficulty to the foreign language learners of Chinese. In this case, formulas such as “Can you write me a recommendation letter?” and “Please write me a recommendation letter.” are both grammatically correct, but not pragmatically appropriate. For the speech act of request, Chinese speakers are likely to employ an indirect strategy as well as external modification strategy, including the grounder (giving a reason), thanking, sweetener (complimenting the hearer), apologizing and promise. DCT data, however, showed that no participants in the control group used this strategy while three participants in the experimental groups did, indicating that exposure to and practice with the similar scenarios in the web-based program helped participants gain awareness of the pragmatic differences between Chinese and English in terms of request.

5. Discussion

The post-test results reveal evidence of learning pragmatic features. Both groups performed better on the post-test, but the experimental group, with access and opportunities to practice through the web-based pragmatics program, had significantly greater gains than the control group. Furthermore, the results indicate that both groups of students’ scores increased on refusal, appreciation, and complaint, although the experimental group outperformed the control group significantly on the speech act of request. Kasper and Rose (2001) note that adult learners can get a considerable amount of L2 pragmatic knowledge even without any instruction, which is because “some pragmatic knowledge is universal and may be transferred from learners’ first language” (p. 4). For instance, a typical refusal strategy is comprised of an apology as an opener, an explanation of the situation and an offer of another opportunity to the interlocutor, that is, the “pragmatic formula + reason statement + sweetener” rule for the speech act of refusal which has been found not to be much different in English and Chinese. Also, English and Chinese do not seem to differ much when expressing appreciation or complaint. However, this is not the case for request. Hong (1997) noted that request making in Chinese is hard for learners who studied Chinese for two years at a college. Zhang and Yu (2009) examined the pragmatic function of making a request of both study-abroad and study-at-home students, and native Chinese speakers. They suggested that L2 learners’ responses reflect their lack of awareness in the degree of directness – direct and indirect – through the use of request strategy and external modification strategy, which have been addressed in previous studies (Han, 2005; Rose, 2000; Zhang & Rue, 2008). Specifically, request strategy includes the direct strategy, the conventionally indirect strategy and hint; whereas the external modification strategy includes categories such as the grounder (giving a reason), thanking, sweetener (complimenting the hearer), apologizing and

promise. In other words, the realization of a successful request depends heavily on the relationship between interlocutors and requires not only pragmatic formulas, but also external modification strategy, which poses great difficulty to foreign language learners of Chinese.

In general, participants in the experimental group scored higher on almost every speech act category, except for bargaining, on the post-test than they did on the pre-test. There are several different reasons why the experimental group did not score higher on the post-test bargaining item. First, a close examination of experimental participants' written answers revealed that 3 out of 12 did not provide answers to the test item for bargaining on the post-test. They may have simply neglected to do so with the test time constraint. Also, those who did not answer all the items may have had comparatively lower language proficiency than others, and it may have taken them more time to answer as the speech acts are more complicated in Chinese as discussed earlier. Thus, the low overall performance of the experimental group on the post-test bargaining item is likely due to the lower participant response to the item.

6. Students' perception of the program

In order to explore the impact of the web-based program, we conducted an email survey with the experimental group. The data revealed several patterns and tendencies. In general, it can be concluded that learning through the program produced positive results and was well received by the participants. It is obvious that the intention of the program to raise students' pragmatic awareness was realized by many students. Examples (1) and (2) exemplify these responses:

(1) *Anyways, I refreshed my memory on the web-based exercises, and went through them again. Looking back, I really wish I would've paid more attention to them, they probably would've helped me out more when relating with the Chinese people every day in Tianjin. I think they do a really good job of teaching outside of the textbook (i.e. help you to learn how to relate to people in every day life, not so much just knowing how to say words).*

(2) *The web-based program was very useful. I remember using it a lot before we left for the trip and used the words to make flash cards and stuff and I like how the recording of the word is there, too. It also helped me to understand cultural differences, like when turning down an invitation and how to bargain and walk away.*

When asked, "what specific pragmatic features that you found most difficult?" One student commented:

I would say refusing someone's request is hardest just because I don't like to hurt someone's feelings and here in the U.S. if you say no twice, then

people [street peddler] get the hint but in China you're expected to say no and the people are very persistent, so then I feel bad. Also bargaining is hard because it seems so unfair since I could pay more money for it but they expect you to bargain so they jack up the price, so you don't really know what fair is.

Finally, students noted that learning through the program, although useful, is not enough without being fully immersed in the target language environment:

Even so, going through these web-based programs isn't really enough to prepare you for China. You have to live it, and learn it as you go. I would encourage your students to continue to use these programs as part of preparation to living, working, and studying in China, but under the understanding that there is no substitute for actually living in China.

7. Conclusion

The current study suggests that the web-based pragmatics program could be used as a supplement to teach pragmatics explicitly and to reinforce what has been taught in the classroom. The merit of the web-based program is that it provides both visual and audio support. As a consequence of the input enhancement, the students' pragmatic awareness level is raised, and the input is likely turned into intake successfully. The program is especially useful in delivering complex speech acts, such as request, which are not always addressed adequately in textbooks. This program could benefit study-abroad participants, as well as other students, in sharpening their awareness of the Chinese pragmatics features prior to departure.

The study findings suggest that the aforementioned web-based program facilitated significant gains in students' pragmatics awareness on the post-test. The question arises as to whether this pragmatics intervention solely contributed to such gains, which has been partially answered. However, due to the design of the current study and relatively small number of participants, it should be noted that individual variables, such as target language use outside of the classroom and different level of motivation, might also be attributed to the differences in learning outcomes. These variables are not adequately addressed in the current study. In fact, students being interviewed reported a range of variation in the ways they engaged with the program. Future research is needed with a more complex research design involving these individual variables.

Furthermore, the data collected from DCTs as in both pre- and post-tests are helpful to assess students' pragmatic awareness, but it may not be a true measure of what students can actually do with the knowledge in real-life encounters (Yamashita, 1996). Future studies may employ a combination of instruments, such as MCTs and role-plays, in addition to DCTs, to compensate for this gap and to gauge students' pragmatic awareness development. As to the rating rubrics for the pre- and post-tests, designed to measure the accuracy of the pragmatics forms and the appropriateness of the pragmatic

strategies, their validity also needs to be tested and restated by future studies. Given these limitations, the results of the study, as pointed out earlier, should be considered suggestive rather than conclusive. In spite of these limitations, the present research does serve its initial objective to make students aware of Chinese pragmatics features that are drastically different from those in English.

Originally intended to better prepare study abroad participants for their overseas experience, the web-based program may also benefit students who remain on their home campus. Such an online program may increase student awareness of Chinese pragmatic features regardless of their study abroad intentions. It may also be used to serve as a preparatory tool for students planning to study or travel in China.

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Appendix A

Themes and web links of the pragmatics program

(Note: Anyone can access the program by simply typing his or her name.)

Unit 1 Greetings & Compliments

<http://clear.msu.edu/teaching/online/ria/worksheets/viewWorksheet.php?ID=Mjg=>

Unit 2 Shopping, Bargaining, & Dining Out the Chinese Way

<http://clear.msu.edu/teaching/online/ria/worksheets/viewWorksheet.php?ID=NTU=>

Unit 3 Dorm Life, Telephone Manners, & Money

<http://clear.msu.edu/teaching/online/ria/worksheets/viewWorksheet.php?ID=NTY=>

Unit 4 Study Life & Entertainment for Students in China

<http://clear.msu.edu/teaching/online/ria/worksheets/viewWorksheet.php?ID=NTc=>

Unit 5 Home Life in China: Chinese Views on Family, Work, & Food

<http://clear.msu.edu/teaching/online/ria/worksheets/viewWorksheet.php?ID=NTg=>

Unit 6 Daily life, Sports and Transportation in China

<http://clear.msu.edu/teaching/online/ria/worksheets/viewWorksheet.php?ID=NTk=>

For students' recording: <http://clear.msu.edu/teaching/online/ria/worksheets/>