

ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF THE PARTICLE *NE* 呢 OBSERVED IN INTERACTIONS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND ITALIAN LEARNERS OF CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXTS

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This contribution is a qualitative analysis of the modal particle *ne* 呢 used as “discourse marker” (following the definition by Schiffrin 1987) in the Chinese language. The particle *ne* can cover the pragmatic functions of topic shift and contrast effect (Shei 2014; Feng 2019), while in interrogative sentences *ne* can introduce doubt or uncertainty (Lee-Wong 2001). In declarative sentences *ne* can help focus the interlocutor’s attention on new, contrasting information (Liu 2011, 399). *Ne* is one of the most frequently recurring particles in discourse and for this reason it is hard to define (Li, Thompson 1981; Lee-Wong 2001).

This contribution uses Conversation Analysis to examine interactions recorded during Chinese language lessons between Chinese teachers and Italian students of Chinese as a foreign language. Observations were carried out on a corpus of 10 hours recorded during on-site university courses in Italy. I discuss the main pragmatic functions of *ne* in these interactions and their specific uses in an instructional context, showing how teachers use the marker *ne* pragmatically to enhance dialogue and their interactions with students, with the purpose of eliciting students’ answers and maintaining their attention.

Keywords: discourse markers, *ne* 呢, conversation analysis, corpus analysis, Chinese as a Foreign Language

1. Introduction¹

The particle *ne* 呢 is often described in Chinese grammar as a linguistic element that is part of the group called “modal particles”, “sentence-final particles (SFPs)” or “utterance-final particles (UFPs, *yúqìzhùcí* 语气助词)” (Liu, Pan, Gu 2001; Liu, Cheng 2009); the difference in the terminology depends on the theoretical perspective adopted. Li and Thompson (1981), Alleton (1981), and more recently Shei (2014) describe these linguistic elements as

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“sentence-final particles”. When these particles are analysed from the point of view of modality, they are more frequently referred to as “modal particles”, because there is a stronger focus on how they work within an utterance (Lee-Wong 1998; Chu 2006; Liu 2011). In this contribution I use the term “utterance-final particles”, or simply “particles”², when I describe their grammatical functions in the literature, while I refer to them as “discourse markers (DMs)” when I discuss the pragmatic functions they cover in discourse.

Since the expression of modality depends on many external and social factors, all linguists agree on the fact that it is very difficult to determine precisely what features are covered by modal particles (Chang 1994; Lee-Wong 1998, 387-388; Liu, Pan, Gu 2001, 411; Li, Thompson 1981, 238; Li 2013, 146; Chu 2006, 163). The first studies on UFPs reported their main grammatical and semantic functions (Chao 1968; Lin 1981; Chang 1994) and the historical process that involves their development (Chappell 1991; Qi 2002), while some recent research has employed a corpus-driven approach to verify the pragmatic functions covered by UFPs in discourse (Chen, He 2001; Liu 2011; Shei 2014; Deng 2015; Tsai, Chu 2017). Among these, I would like to mention in particular Chen and He (2001), who describe the interactions between Chinese language teachers and students of Chinese as a Foreign Language (FL) and as a second language (L2), concentrating in particular on the UFP *duì bu duì* 对不对 (right?), which can be classified as a pragmatic marker (using the theoretical frame proposed by Fraser 1996); Tsai and Chu (2017) also described the main pragmatic role of discourse markers in the interaction between Chinese teachers and Chinese L2 students, but they mostly concentrated on the discourse functions of *nà* 那 (then), *ránhòu* 然后 (afterwards), *nàge* 那个 (that) and *shénme* 什么 (what), distinguishing them from their grammatical use, they did not consider UFPs in their study. Tsai and Chu (2017)’s work, as well as Chen and He (2001)’s, are to my knowledge the only studies that focus on pragmatic markers in Chinese in an instructional context.

The aim of this contribution is to provide new insights into the research on the pragmatic roles of UFPs, observing their use as discourse markers in interactions between Chinese mother-tongue teachers and Chinese L2 students. In particular, I will detail some of the pragmatic functions of the UFP *ne*, employing a corpus-driven approach. I consider this particle to be a discourse marker, as defined by Schiffrin (1987) and Fraser (1999, 2006). Using the tool AntConc, I have identified the functions of this UFP in the data, identifying its collocates and analysing them in context, in order to retrieve and discuss its main pragmatic functions.

This article is organised in the following way: in the next section I delineate the definitions of “discourse marker” and “pragmatic marker” employed in this contribution and the main studies on which I have based my analysis. I then report results of a literature review on the particle *ne* and describe the main pragmatic functions that have been discussed in previous studies, with particular regard to the functions detected in my corpus. Next I describe my research questions and the corpus of data used for my observations. Finally, I

² In the literature review section, I will also mention the terms used by each single cited researcher to refer to utterance final particles and their pragmatic functions.

analyse and discuss the classifications used to describe occurrences of the data in this corpus and the implications of this analysis for teaching purposes.

2. Outline of the Previous Studies on Discourse and Pragmatic Markers

2.1 Studies on Discourse Markers

At the pragmatic level of analysis, Chinese modal particles can be considered as “pragmatic markers” or “discourse markers” because they are used in different types of sentences with various functions: to express “modality” (Lepadat 2017, 245; Chu 1998), to organise the structure of discourse in the interaction, to define the information structure, and finally to regulate the illocutive force of utterances (e.g., Chu 2009; Liu 2011; Deng 2015, among others).

As such, these particles are present in every language, and they can also be observed from a comparative point of view (see Bazzanella et al. 2007; Somongyi 2017 on the comparison between languages other than Chinese; see Conti, Carella in this collection of contributions; Badan, Romagnoli 2019 on the comparison between Chinese and Italian languages). Schiffrin (1987, 31) operationally defines discourse markers as “sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk”. Discourse markers are taken into consideration for their structural relations with other units and their cohesive nature at the textual level. Examples of discourse markers in English are linguistic units such as “oh, well, and, but, or, so, because, now, then, I mean, y’know” (Schiffrin 1987, 31).

Discourse markers cannot be defined in a unique and synthetical way; they are identified through their general features at the syntactic, prosodic and pragmatic levels of analysis. They do not belong to an autonomous lexical category and they are not part of the propositional content (Schiffrin 1987; Redeker 1991; Fraser 1996, 1999, 2006). Discourse markers can belong to different grammatical classes and they are multifunctional, occurring in oral speech and being marked intonationally (Bazzanella 1995; Badan, Romagnoli 2019; De Cristofaro, Crocco, Badan, Plevoets 2022, 125).

According to Fraser (1996, 1999, 2006) they do not denote concepts but have a procedural meaning. He uses the general term “pragmatic markers” to define them. They can be further divided into subgroups, depending on the functions they cover in discourse (Chen, He 2001): basic markers, which signal the illocutionary force of discourse; commentary markers, which are messages that comment on the content meaning of the sentence; parallel markers, which are messages in addition to the basic message; and discourse markers, which signal the relationship of the basic message to the foregoing discourse. I will adopt the term “discourse marker” throughout this article, to refer both to their cohesive functions of these linguistic devices in discourse and to their interactional functions.

2.2 Studies on Discourse Markers in Chinese

For Yang (2006), Chinese discourse markers are a category encompassing what is sometimes referred to as “discourse particles”, which occur in the sentence-final position in Chinese.

Shei (2014) uses the term SFPs and “constituent final particles” meaning the so-called “*yǐqìcí* 语气词”, which are functional language devices that can either have grammatical functions or give more information on the structure of an utterance³, highlighting notions or entities, or indicating the speaker’s attitude towards an utterance; they also help manage the information by marking a piece of information already shared or introducing a new piece of information. He underlines the peculiarity of SFPs in Chinese, highlighting their absence in other Western languages such as English. He refers to these linguistic devices as typical of oral language and states that they have to be learnt as a separate category by Chinese L2 learners, who need to understand how to use them in real-life interactions. These devices are considered by Shei as “discourse particles” and they are analysed according to the 1987 framework by Schiffrin, because they give information on the structure of the utterance they occur in and/or indicate the role of the speaker in discourse. They contribute to managing the information by marking a piece of information as already shared or as newly shared by the speaker with the interlocutor. In line with Shei’s work, the present study also treats UFP *ne* as a DM.

Many researchers distinguish between the grammatical and pragmatic role of UFPs (Lee-Wong 1998, 2001; Liu 2011; Chen, He 2001; Deng 2015; Tsai, Chu 2017). To define the pragmatic role of UFPs, the present contribution takes into consideration utterance-final particles used as discourse markers, both when they are not grammatically optional and when they are syntactically independent, because sometimes they play a role at the structural and interactional level and at the same time have a propositional meaning (Chu 2006).

To operationally work on these last features, this contribution makes use of Liu’s definition of textual and interpersonal functions (2011): he applies an adapted version of Halliday (1970)’s framework to analyse DMs in Chinese. Liu’s framework of analysis considers both textual and interpersonal functions, that are not mutually exclusive. Liu (2011) identifies a list of textual functions of DMs: marking transitions (*e.g.*, topic shift, introducing a new aspect of the topic, opening and closing conversation); introducing a new turn (initiators); introducing an explanation, justification or background; introducing or closing a digression; self-correction; introducing direct speech; and holding the floor. The interpersonal functions of discourse markers are: expressing a response or a reaction to the preceding discourse or attitude towards the following discourse, including back-channel signals; hedges expressing speaker tentativeness; and effecting cooperation, sharing, or intimacy between speaker and hearer, including confirming shared assumptions, checking or expressing understanding, requesting confirmation, expressing deference or saving face (politeness).

As far as previous research on DMs used in classroom interaction is concerned, two studies are particularly relevant: Tsai and Chu (2017) and Chen and He (2001).

Tsai and Chu (2017) analysed a corpus of 220 minutes of recordings of Chinese courses. Data were drawn from Chinese learners who learnt Chinese L2 in Taipei or FL abroad. The authors distinguished the grammatical and discourse functions of the most frequent discourse markers in Chinese speech (*ranhou*, *na*, *nage*, *shenme*) and showed that fluen-

³ This distinction was earlier proposed by Chao (1968), Chu (1998), among others.

cy and competency in Chinese oral speech are correlated with the frequency of usage of DMs. This study is inspired by Tsai and Chu (2017) (some pragmatic functions of DMs employed by teachers in the article by Tsai and Chu are also detected in this study, topic shift in particular) and aims to develop its conclusions. Indeed, Tsai and Chu consider the introduction of discourse markers in Chinese language teaching to be important for non-Chinese-speaking students to give them a greater understanding of natural speech patterns in conversation, but they do not analyse UFPs.

Chen and He (2001) examined *dui bu dui* used as a tag question at the end of a Tone Constructional Unit (TCU), and they explained how *dui bu dui* can be considered a pragmatic marker, either as a “basic marker” (signaling the illocutionary force of the sentence proposition – and giving an evaluation or providing confirmation), as a “discourse marker” (as an independent TCU, underlining the boundary of interaction, so it is a boundary marker and attention maintainer), or as a “boundary marker”.

In a pedagogical context, the aim and the structure that inform the interaction are mainly used to show the epistemic stance of the speaker in order to address the interlocutors (Stivers, Rossano 2010; Shao, Zhu 2002; Chen, He 2001). Chen and He showed in their study on *dui bu dui* that this kind of tag question does not occur to trigger a response from students, but instead is used as a basic (or stance) marker to pragmatically highlight the illocutionary force of the sentence proposition. Moreover, in these interactions *dui bu dui* can be used as a discourse marker to signal transitions between interactional sequences, so that the teacher can more easily maintain the attention of the students during the lesson (Piccinini 2021).

2.3 *Ne* as a Discourse Marker

The UFPs *a* 啊, *ba* 吧, *ne* 呢 and *o* 哦 are among the most used in spoken language (Li 2013; Xu 2015). They have been analysed as pragmatic markers in many previous studies, with their functions mainly detected in speech (Li, Thompson 1981; Shei 2014; Feng 2019). The particle *ne*, in particular, has multifarious functions depending on the contexts where it occurs, and it is difficult to give it a precise and unique definition (Lee-Wong 2001; Wu 2005; Chu 2006).

Li and Thompson (1981, 300) claim that the particle *ne* has the effect of calling on the hearer to pay particular attention to the information conveyed because it is a response to the hearer’s claim, expectation and belief. *Ne* introduces contrast in different types of sentences: declarative, interrogative, imperative and exclamative (e.g., Lü 2009 (1980); Chang 1994; Wu 2005; Chu 2006).

Alleton (1981) identifies *ne* in interrogative utterances used to mitigate the tone of questions in friendly chat, in face-to-face interactions. The direct question is more typical of police or interrogations, while the use of the UFP *ne* mitigates the tone. Moreover, she claims that *ne* contributes to the persuasiveness of the statement, by appealing to the listener’s active participation.

Chu (1984, 1985) and Chang (1994) agree with Alleton (1981) and claim that *ne* expresses politeness. Huang (1994) analyses the pragmatic function of *ne* in a written play

and claims that *ne* can be interpreted as a marker of social status or social distance. For Lin (1984), Alleton (1981) and Chu (2006), the particle *ne* (and *ba*, *a*) can be used to indicate modality, and in particular the expression of the speaker's attitude.

Lee-Wong (1998, 388) cites Searle (1969) and Östman (1981), who consider particles, tense variation, modality, clichés and frozen expressions as “pragmatic devices”. She describes *ne* occurring in utterance-medial particles in face-to-face requests as a mitigator in a context where a face threat is implicit; it affects modality rather than the proposition of the sentence. For Lee-Wong, the pragmatic effect of *ne* is at the interactional level; it reflects the speaker's uncertain attitude towards the request. *Ne* can also be considered an “evincive” (Schourup 1982) as when *ne* evinces introspection on the part of the speaker.

As a discourse marker, *ne* also recurs in discourse to put information and ideas in order, by introducing contrasting concepts, or by presenting opposite points of view, known or unknown information, or real or hypothetical circumstances (Shei 2014, 346; Feng 2019, 228). From this point of view, *ne* acts at both an interactional and a structural level, helping the speaker to introduce new information and to focus the hearer's attention on it (Lee-Wong 2001). At the same time, this particle helps to maintain discourse coherence by signalling a new topic (Liu 2011). Deng (2015) also considers *ne* as a pragmatic topic marker (*huàtí biāoji* 话题标记), comparing it with the markers *a*, *ba* and *ma* 吗. He argues through examples that *ne* in sentence-medial position marks topicality of the full word component that precedes it, reinforcing the contrastive relationship between the topic and the other elements, or establishing the contrastive relationship between the topic and the other elements.

In his contribution on the UFP *ne*, Chu (2006) gives a general review of most of the contributions that describe its pragmatic functions and agrees with the contribution of Wu (2005), who states that *ne* is an interactive particle and that it functions to indicate the speaker's engagement of the hearer for a shared common ground, which makes the interaction possible (Chu 2006, 8-9). Chu also suggests that all the different pragmatic functions attributed to *ne* can be put under an umbrella comprising two main properties: a necessity to “look back for contrast” and a demand for “continuation” (Chu 2006, 13). What is particularly important for this contribution is that Chu does not necessarily differentiate between 1) the function of *ne* as a marker of the utterance as a question, and 2) the function of marking the topic in a “non-yes-no” (open-ended) question. In other words, when *ne* performs the function of a question marker, its function as a topic marker can be performed at the same time.

Li (2013) agrees with Chu's approach on *ne* as a signal of a negotiation for a common ground between the speaker and the hearer (Wu 2005), a semantic function that is similar to that identified by Chu (2006, 27), consisting in the “speaker's intention for the hearer to look back for contrast and to continue on the basis of what is being said.” This function has been observed in this contribution, when particle *ne* is added at the end of some declarative sentences. Its presence can be explained in terms of “relevance increasing” (Chu 2006, 25): it is due to the effort by the speaker to make what is uttered more relevant to the context where that utterance occurs. Li (2013)'s analysis is also important for the pre-

sent study, because starting from the theory given by Chu (2006), Li (2013) gives another the interpretation of the pragmatic use of *ne*. He carries out an experiment on prosodic features of exclamative utterances terminating with the particle *ne* (in the construction *hai ...a/ne* 还...啊/呢) which seem to correspond to some of the utterances observed in my corpus. Li (2013) finds that in some contexts the speakers do not try to invite the hearers to look back for contrast with their shared common ground (as Wu 2005 and Chu 2006 affirm), but instead speakers use particle *ne* to focus on their own reflection and highlight the inconsistency between their own assumptions and the facts.

Tao (2021) analyses a corpus of spoken academic Chinese and he finds that the particle *ne* occurs exclusively at the utterance-final position and it is used mainly to draw the audience's attention (Lee-Wong 2001) or to engage the listener's active participation.

The main functions of *ne* that have been identified by previous research and found in the corpus for this research are classified and listed in Section 5 of this contribution.

Starting from the functions of *ne* that have been identified in discourse by previous studies, I decided to investigate their occurrence in classroom activity, in the interactions between teachers of Chinese language and Chinese L2 learners. In particular, with regards to the function of *ne* as a discourse marker, Research Question 1 (RQ1) is:

1. What is the relative frequency of *ne* with respect to other particles? Is it the same as for other kinds of oral interactions?

In addition, Research Question 2 (RQ2) is:

2. Are the main pragmatic functions of particle *ne* in these interactions between Students and Teachers in line with previous research?

Given the specific nature of the interactional context taken into consideration, the initial hypothesis is that not all functions of *ne* detectable among native speakers in everyday life conversation will be observed in this corpus. As a consequence, Research Question 3 (RQ3) is:

3. What specific roles do the pragmatic functions of *ne* play in an instructional context?

3. Methodology

3.1 Description of Data

The discourse marker *ne* was observed in interactions between two Chinese-speaking teachers and a group of Italian students learning Chinese as a foreign language in Italy. The interactions were audio recorded during the first half of 2018 and transcribed. The transcribed lessons covered a total of 10 hours of oral lessons given in person. About 20 students were involved in the lessons; the students were all Italian mother-tongue speakers. The number of students participating in each class varied because lessons were not compulsory. Classes were all taught in person, by two teachers; they were not present at the same time but used the same teaching material⁴. One of the teachers taught the exercises of a unit, while the

⁴ The Chinese manuals employed by the teachers were a series published in three volumes corresponding to the level "Upper Elementary", which should correspond to the level of the students taking part in the Chinese

other mainly taught the grammar of the same unit. The grammar teacher explained rules in an applicative way, using explicative exercises that included reading exercises, sentences and discussions on class content. The grammar teacher was from a city in the northeast of the People's Republic of China (Harbin, capital of the Heilongjiang Province), but remained in Beijing after attending university there (at the time of the lessons, she was in her sixties); her spoken language was a variety that is very near to Modern Chinese Standard language. The second teacher was of Taiwanese origin, she was born in Taipei, but had lived in Italy for more than 20 years at the time when the lessons were recorded; she spoke the Taiwanese variety of Chinese language.

3.2 Data Coding Criteria and Conversation Analysis Approach

Conversation Analysis was used to transcribe the material, following conventions by Jefferson (2004) and Chen and He (2001). Any action and extralinguistic comments have been put in double parentheses. Transcriptions are accompanied by two lines of glosses: one word-by-word translation and an English translation of the whole sentence. The minimal unit of analysis is the sequence that structures the turn of conversation (sentences, phrases, and words) and could be identified through the tonal, pragmatic and syntactic completion of a conversational unit⁵.

4. *Quantitative Occurrence of Utterance-Final Particles in the Corpus*

No UFPs were produced by students in the corpus; this was probably due to the level of competence of the students, who were at an intermediate level of proficiency in the Chinese language, corresponding to a language competence between the third and the fourth level of the *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* certificate⁶.

Moreover, the specific communicative situation under analysis (the instructional context) is qualitatively different from peer-to-peer interactions or the interactions between native speakers. As a matter of fact, classroom interactions are typically asymmetric and the participants' roles fixed, with a strong tendency towards non-bidirectionality (see the triadic structure first proposed by Sinclair, Coulthard 1975). This had a strong influence on the pragmatic functions of *ne* observed in my corpus and could explain why students never used *ne* (see section 5.1).

class. The grammar teacher worked on the text by Mou Shirong (2008); the teacher who taught conversation and exercises employed the textbook by Wang Xiaoshan (2008).

⁵ In this contribution I adopt the definition of turns by Chen and He (2001, 1448), where they describe in detail what a "Turn Constructional Unit" (TCU) is.

⁶ Conti (2021) observed the use of SFPs by Italian learners of CFL in a tandem-learning context and he found out that Italian learners rarely use SFPs (including *ne*) in the interactions with peers.

Table 1 - Frequency of Chinese sentence-final particles in the corpus of Chinese lessons

Teachers	a 啊	ne 呢	ma 吗	ba 吧	la 啦	ya 呀	e 呃	na 呐	Word tokens
Total	439	408	342	83	40	30	28	13	39870
Percentage	1.10%	1.02%	0.86%	0.21%	0.10%	0.08%	0.07%	0.03%	

As shown in table 1, the most frequent UFP in the two corpora was *a*, with 439 occurrences (1.10 % of the total number of word tokens), followed by *ne* with 408 occurrences (1.02%), then *ma* (0.86%), *ba* (0.21%), *la* 啦 (0.10%), *ya* 呀 (0.08%), *e* 呃 (0.075), and *na* 呐 (0.03%). As an answer to the first research question (RQ1), particle *ne* was the second most frequent UFP in the corpus, in line with other research that considers this particle to be one of the most used in oral speech.

5. Main Pragmatic Functions Identified in the Corpus

Drawing on previous research on the particle *ne*, I identified five main functions in the corpus and counted their occurrence, providing percentages of specific functions in the corpus (see table 2). I also distinguished them according to the type of sentences (interrogative, declarative or exclamative) and by the position in which the utterance *ne* occurred (see table 3).

Table 2 - Occurrences and percentages of types of functions

Type of function	Number of occurrences
1. Mitigator	116 (28.4%) with answer: 36 (31%) no answer: 80 (69%)
2. Response to expectation	5 (1.2%)
3. Topic marker and topic shift	82 (20.1%)
4. Topic introduction	182 (44.6%) <i>Elements preceding ne:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nouns, temporal adverbs, demonstratives: 54 (29.7%) • DMs <i>na</i>, <i>lingwài</i> 另外: 50 (27.5%) • DM <i>ranhou</i>: 29 (15.9%) • DMs <i>suǒyǐ</i> 所以, <i>jiéguǒ</i> 结果: 29 (15.9%) • DMs <i>dànshì</i> 但是, <i>kěshì</i> 可是: 14 (7.7%) • DM <i>rúguǒ</i> 如果: 3 (1.6%) • DMs <i>shìshìshàng</i> 事实上, <i>qíshí</i> 其实: 2 (1.1%) • DM <i>yīnwèi</i> 因为: 1 (0.5%)
5. Transition of interactional sequences	23 (5.6%)
Total	408 (100%)

DM: discourse marker.

Table 3 - *Types of pragmatic functions of ne identified in the corpus*

<i>Typology</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Type of sentence</i>
1. Mitigator (Alleton 1981; Lee-Wong 1998, 2001): softens the tone of questions	sentence-final	interrogative
2. Response to expectation (Li and Thompson 1981; Wu 2005): introduces contrastiveness or supports speaker's claim (<i>bái ..ne</i>)	sentence-final	declarative/exclamative
3. Topic marker and topic shift (Lee-Wong 2001): maintains discourse coherence (truncated questions)	sentence-medial	interrogative
4. Topic introduction (Liu 2011; Chu 2006; Tao 2021): draws the attention of the hearer to new and contrastive information (<i>suoyi/ranhou/na + (N/Phrase/Pr) + ne?</i>)	sentence-medial	declarative/interrogative
5. Signal of transition of interactional (or conceptual) sequences (Lee-Wong 2001; Chu 2006; Tao 2021): pragmatic role in teaching procedure (<i>bái yǒu ne? 还有呢? </i>)	sentence-final	interrogative

5.1 *Ne* as a “Mitigator”

According to Liu (2011) when *ne* occurs at the end of sentences in interrogative form (i.e., *tèzhǐyíwènjù* 特指疑问句, wh-questions), it is considered syntactically compulsory, and it is not regarded as a discourse marker. However, in line with the interpretation by Alleton (1981), Lin (1981), and Lee-Wong (1998, 2001), when *ne* occurs at the end of interrogative sentences it does have a pragmatic function in that it softens the tone of the question and expresses uncertainty. *Ne* was used to soften the tone of questions in almost one third (28.4%, 116 times) of all occurrences, at the end of non-yes- no questions (i.e. *tezhi yiwenju*).

EXAMPLE 1

T: teacher

S: student

Situation: After listening to a recorded dialogue, the teacher asks students to explain why the person in the dialogue has bought a lightweight bicycle:

T: [...] 最后买的什么车?
 [...] *zuìhòu mǎi-de shénme chē?*
 lastly buy-NOM what bicycle?
 [...] lastly what bicycle did (he) buy?

S: 轻便车。
Qīngbiàn chē.
 Lightweight bicycle.
 (A) lightweight bicycle.

- T: 他买了轻便车, 为什么?
Tā mǎi le qīngbiàn chē, wèi shénme?
 3SG.M buy ASP lightweight bicycle, why?
 He bought a lightweight bicycle, why?
- 他为什么最后决定买轻便车呢?
Tā wèi shénme zuìhòu juéding mǎi le qīngbiàn chē ne?
 3SG.M why lastly decide buy ASP lightweight bicycle FP?
 Why did he finally decide to buy a lightweight bicycle?
- S: 因为—
Yīnwèi—
 Because...
 Because...

At the beginning of this exchange in Example 1, the teacher did not use the particle *ne* in the question. But she then reformulated the question before letting the students answer, giving the question a softer and more familiar tone. When these kinds of questions ending with *ne* were employed in the corpus, I considered them politeness devices, calling them “mitigators” (Lee-Wong 1998, 388). Of the 116 utterances I detected of this use in the corpus, 80 of them (69%) were not followed by any answer from the students. This is in line with previous observations on discourse markers in a formative context, where markers in Chinese are mainly used to show the epistemic stance of the speaker to address the interlocutors (Chen, He 2001). See Example 2:

EXAMPLE 2

- 01 T: 我们为什么要这张发票呢?
Wǒmen wèi shénme yào zhè zhāng fāpiào ne?
 1PL why require this CL receipt FP?
 So, why do we want this receipt?
- 02 啊, 它会告诉我们什么呢?
À, tā huì gàosu wǒmen shénme ne?
 IP, 3SG.N will tell 1PL what FP?
 Ah, what will it tell us?
- 03 第一个啊, 我们看, 就是它会让我们知道,
Dì-yī gè a, wǒmen kàn, jiù shì tā huì ràng
 AFF-one CLFP, 1PL see, just be it will let
wǒmen zhīdao,
 1PL know,
 The first, let's see, it will just let us know,

- 04 我们应该付多少钱啊,
women yīngāi fù duōshao qián a,
 IPL should pay how much money FP,
 how much we should pay,

In Example 2, the first two questions that terminate with the particle *ne* are supposed to be uttered to introduce the explanation of the use of the receipt (*fāpiào* 发票, line 01) that was introduced in the first question (*Wǒmen wèi shénme yào zhè zhāng fāpiào ne?* 我们为什么要这张发票呢?, So, why do we want this receipt?, line 01) and specified by the second interrogative sentence followed by *ne* (*tā huì gàosu wǒmen shénme ne* 它会告诉我们什么呢?, line 02): these two questions are used to introduce the explanation given by the teacher herself; the students are not required to answer. *Ne* is thus used by the teacher to stimulate students' attention, not necessarily to receive an answer.

5.2 *Ne* as a "Response to Expectation"

This function was detected in the corpus when an interaction between teacher and students was expected through a sentence uttered in declarative form. The utterance where *ne* occurred, usually contained other adverbs like *cái* 才 (actually, really) and *hái* 还 (still, yet) that highlighted the pragmatic function of *ne*, in which it either supported or contradicted the preceding claim. This interpretation was taken from Li and Thompson (1981) and Wu (2005). It resulted to be the least-used pragmatic function (5 occurrences, 1.2 % of the total), because students never replied to questions posed by teachers using *ne*.

EXAMPLE 3

Situation: the teacher is explaining the meaning of *jímáng* 急忙 (hurried) in the first utterance of the example. To explain the meaning of the word, the teacher imagines a situation in which she reminds students that they will have to take a test and they utter the sentence containing *ne*:

- 01 T: 走了, 急忙跑出去啊!
zǒu le, jí máng pǎo-chūqù a!
 Go ASP, hurried run-out go FP!
 Gotta go, quick, rush out!
- 02 我听老师说,要考试, 我“急忙”说,
Wǒ tīng lǎoshī shuō, yào kǎoshì, wǒ "jí máng" shuō:
 1SG listen to teacher say require exam, 1SG "hurried" say:
 I hear the teacher say that: "(You) have to take the test", I say "in a hurry":
- 03 “我还没准备好呢”。
"Wǒ hái méi zhǔnbèi-hǎo ne".
 1SG yet not prepare-well FP
 I am not ready yet.

The utterance that contains *ne* is a possible reply by a student in the context created *ad hoc* by the teacher to explain the term *jimang*, where she imagines reminding students that they “have to take the test” (*yào kǎoshì* 要考试, line 02). The utterance terminating with *ne* interacts with the original sentence to show a contrast: “I am not ready yet” (line 03). The speaker shows their refusal to accept the preceding claim (*yao kaoshi*) through the use of *ne* at the end of the utterance. If *ne* were not uttered, the sentence would only be an evaluation of one’s own preparation, while with the addition of *ne* a tone of contrastive reaction is added. Here the use of *ne* seems to be in line with utterances observed by Li (2013, 147-153), where he claims that in some contexts the speaker is not focusing on the contrast with what the addressee knows, but instead is reflecting on the inconsistency between her own assumptions and the facts. This case seems to be exactly the same, in so far as the teacher is mimicking students uttering “*wǒ hái méi zhǔnbèi hǎo ne* 我还没准备好呢”, opposing to what she herself has just said (*yao kaoshi*).

This kind of utterance is very rare in the corpus, because it implies the construction of a hypothetical situation by the speakers in which they interact and contradict themselves, and this could be difficult to explain to the students.

5.3 Topic Marker and Topic Shift

When it directly follows the component to which it is linked semantically, *ne* has the pragmatic function of introducing a new topic, which is usually in contrast with the one in the utterance that preceded it. The grammatical function of *ne* here is that of a question particle, but here I use the study of Chu (2006) who does not necessarily differentiate between the function of *ne* as a marker of the utterance as a question and its function of marking the topic in a question. In other words, when *ne* performs the function of a question marker, its function as a topic marker can be performed at the same time.

This function of the particle *ne* has previously been discussed by Li and Thompson (1981, 87), who defined the topic as “a noun phrase (or a verb phrase) that names what the sentence is about, it can be definite or generic, occurs in sentence-initial position, and may be followed by a pause or a pause particle”. *Ne* is mentioned among the particles they refer to. In this corpus, this function of *ne* was observed in 82 cases (20.1% of total occurrences).

Deng (2015), Chu (2006) and Lee-Wong (2001) agree that, when occurring as a marker, *ne* highlights the topic formed by a full word that precedes it and that is in contrast with the utterance that follows. At an interactional level, *ne* helps the speaker in a cognitive sense to introduce and organise new information and to focus the attention of the hearer on such information. *Ne* as a topic shift marker helps to structure coherence in discourse by means of semantic connectivity. Through the focus on a new topic and on the comment that follows *ne*, the hearer’s attention is focused on the new topic. The propositions are organised as pairs of opposites that are highlighted by the discourse particle *ne*, which has the function of informational contrast.

A pause after *ne*, as a prosodic feature in an informational unit, is common in naturally occurring conversation (Example 4).

EXAMPLE 4

- 01 T 王国就是kingdom的意思。
Wángguó jiù shì kingdom de yìsi.
 Kingdom just be *kingdom* NOM meaning.
 “Wangguo” just means “kingdom”.
- 02 那, 中国被叫做自行车王国,
Nà, Zhōngguó bèi jiàozuò zìxíngchē wángguó,
 So, China *bei* call bicycle kingdom,
 So, China is called “The Kingdom of bicycles”.
- 03 那, 你们觉得, 如果是意大利呢?
Nà, nǐmen juéde, rúguǒ shì Yìdàlì ne?
 Then, 2PL think, if be Italy FP?
 So, you think, if (it) were Italy?
- 04 (...)
- 05 <XX>意大利你们觉得被叫做什么?
 <XX> *Yìdàlì nǐmen juéde bèi jiàozuò shénme?*
 <XX> Italy 2PL think *bei* call what?
 <XX> What do you think Italy should be called?

Just like argued by Lee-Wong (2001), when *ne* has the function of a topic marker, it introduces a shift of topic that underlines a change of referent. The teacher is talking about different kinds of vehicles and she is explaining how China is considered the “kingdom of bicycles” (*zìxíngchē wángguó* 自行车王国, line 02). Then she changes the topic and asks what Italy would be called according to its most common means of transportation.

Corresponding to the first proposition, where the topic was *Zhōngguó* 中国 (China), in line 02, the second topic is signalled by *ne*, which follows it, and the new information is the question that the teacher would like the students to answer (line 03):

(Adapted from Lee-Wong 2001)

Proposition 1

Topic	Comment
<i>Zhōngguó</i> China	<i>bei jiaozuo zixingche wangguo,</i> Is called “The Kingdom of bicycles”

Proposition 2

Topic [NE]	Comment
<i>Yìdàlì</i> NE Italy	<i>Bei jiaozuo shenme?</i> is called what?

The content of these two propositions is enriched, in example 4, by the use of other units of talk: i.e., *na* and *nimen juéde* 你们觉得 (You think), that here reinforce the main structure and are used at a pragmatic level as discourse markers. Both *na* and *nimen juéde* could be omitted but, as other studies have highlighted (see, for example, Casentini in this special section), they contribute to maintaining the attention of the hearer on the informational content of the proposition that follows.

In the examples found in the corpus, *ne* as a topic marker often occurred when the teacher wanted the students to answer her questions. The same schema is repeated, but the shift of topic is given by the use of the personal pronoun used at the second person singular (sometimes plural). This is shown in Example 5:

EXAMPLE 5

- 01 T: 可以看一下, 我们在邮局可以寄什么。
Kěyǐ kàn yíxià, wǒmen zài yóujú kěyǐ jì shénme.
 Can see a little, 1PL at postal office can send what.
 We can have a look, what can we send at the post office.
- 02 他去了, 他去寄明信片。
Tā qù le, tā qù jì míngxìnpìan.
 3SG.M go ASP, 3SG.M go send postcard.
 He went, he went to send a postcard.
- 03 > 她呢? 她去寄信, 寄信。
Tā ne? Tā qù jì xìn, jì xìn.
 3SG.F *ne?* 3SG.F go send letter, send letter.
 She goes to send a letter, send a letter.
- 04 > 寄信, 寄明信片。你呢?
Jì xìn, jì míngxìnpìan. Nǐ ne?
 Send letter, send postcard. 2SG *ne?*
 (she) sent letters, sent postcards. And you?
- 05 S: 我在网络买一个, 一件礼物。但是我不太喜欢, 所以我去了一一
Wǒ zài wǎngluò mǎi yí ge, yí jiàn lǐwù. Dànshì wǒ bù tài xǐhuān, suǒyǐ wǒ qù le --
 1SG on internet buy a CL, a CL present. But 1SG NEG too like, so 1SG go ASP ---
 I bought a, a present on the Internet. But I didn't like it very much so I went ---
- 06 T: 邮局。
yóujú
 Post office.

In the example above, the discourse marker *ne* is used to shift the topic. In this case, the personal pronoun *tā* 她 (she) (line 03) is substituted by the second personal pronoun singular in order to realise a question (*Nǐ ne?* 你呢, And you?, line 04) that implies the explicit question (你寄什么 *nǐ jì shénme?* What do you send?). This is a practice that allows *ne* to

be used as a discourse marker, because it highlights the topic and maintains the attention of the students and the rhythm of the lesson, introducing new words or repeating old concepts through the same structure highlighted in the preceding example (I simplified the structure to focus on the main content of the interaction):

Proposition 1

Topic	Comment
<i>Tā</i>	<i>qù jì míngxìnpiàn</i>
He	went to send a postcard

Proposition 2

Topic	NE	Comment
<i>Tā</i>	<i>NE</i>	<i>qù jì xìn</i>
She		goes to send letters

Proposition 3

Topic	[NE]	Comment
<i>Ni</i>	<i>[NE]</i>	(to be developed by the student) ("I went to the post office...")

The teacher uses this structure to make use of the pragmatic function of the marker *ne*, allowing her to elicit the student's answer and maintain his/her attention. In this context, *ne* not only has the role of topic marker, but also of discourse marker, used to introduce a topic shift and maintain the attention of the students. So, even if it is syntactically necessary, it also covers these pragmatic roles. This is in line with the analysis by Chu (2006), who claims that both a syntactic and pragmatic use of the particle can be detected in the same utterance.

5.4 Topic Introduction

I have called the fourth pragmatic function of *ne* "topic introduction", in line with the definition used by Liu (2011, 399) in his corpus. With this function, *ne* appeared in 182 cases (44,6% of total occurrences). He claims that in this kind of utterances (in line with the uses detected by Lee-Wong 2001), *ne* signals a topic shift and shows new information in sentence-medial position; the same use also corresponds to a later interpretation of *ne* having the two core properties mentioned above: looking back for contrast and demanding for continuation (Chu 2006). Liu's textual function of *ne* is described as "drawing the attention of the hearer to the following new and contrastive information." (Liu 2011, 299). Moreover, this use of *ne* was often followed by a pause in the corpus, as found by Liu (2011) and Tao (2021). Tao (2021) also found that this use of *ne* often occurs after other discourse markers. In my corpus, discourse markers preceding *ne* were mainly *na* (then),

ranhou (then), *kěshi* (but), *suǒyǐ* (so)⁷. This use of *ne* recurring in sentence-medial position is very common in spoken language and it helps to maintain the cohesion and the general coherence of the discourse. In a formative context it is often used to highlight an explanation of lexical items, or to carry out practical activities with students.

Example 6 is an example from my corpus:

EXAMPLE 6

Situation: the teacher is confuting the idea in the West that traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is harmful to our health, and she is explaining that this prejudice is due to the fact that the healing process is slower using the Eastern method:

- 01 T: [...] 给了她一个月的药,
 [...] *Gěi le tā yī ge yuè de yào,*
 [...] give ASP 3SG.F one CL month NOM medicine,
 [...] gave her medicine for one month,
- 不是一个星期就好了,
bù shì yī ge xīngqī jiù hǎo le,
 NEG be one CL week right away good FP,
 a week is not enough to recover,
- 02 她得吃一个月的药, 所以呢,
tā děi chī yī ge yuè de yào, suǒyǐ ne,
 3SG.F must eat one CL month NOM medicine, so FP,
 she must take medicine for one month, so,
- 03 中药对身体没有害处,
Zhōngyào duì shēntǐ méi yǒu hàichu,
 TCM with regard to health not have harm,
 Traditional Chinese Medicine is not harmful to health,
- 04 但是效果比较慢, [...]
dànshì xiàoguǒ bǐjiào màn, [...]
 but result relatively slow, [...]
 but the effects are quite slow, [...]

The particle *ne* follows the conjunction *suoyi*, which introduces a conclusion of the reasoning preceding it. The concept being introduced here is the statement *Zhōngyào duì shēntǐ méi yǒu hàichu* 中药对身体有害处 (TCM is not harmful to health), being affirmed right after the phrase containing particle *ne*. The final utterance is thus highlighted by *ne* (line 02), that here draws the attention of the addressee on the information transmitted by the

⁷ For a description of the occurrence of *ne* following discourse marker *na* see the contribution by Casentini, while *ranhou* as a discourse marker is described by Conti and Carella. Both are collected in this special section on discourse markers.

last two utterances on the explanation of the advantages of Chinese medicine (*Zhōngyào duì shēntǐ méi yǒu hàichu, dànnshì xiàoguǒ bǐjiào màn, [...] 中药对身体没有坏处, 但是效果比较慢*, TCM is not harmful to health, but the effects are quite slow).

5.5 Signal of Transition of Interactional Sequences

The last function detected in the corpus is inspired by both Chu (2006) and Chen and He (2001). It is about the use of *ne* in questions with *hai you* (*hai you ne*, And (then) what?). This interrogative utterance is considered in the corpus as having a pragmatic function in that it signals a procedure in the teaching practice, like *dui bu dui* in the analysis by Chen and He (2001). This specific short question was employed 23 times (5,6%). Its pragmatic use is the same as that described above in 6.3 (topic marker and topic shift), but it recurs many times in the corpus with the same structure (*hai you* preceded by *ne*), this is why I considered it as a fixed phrase to be highlighted separately, similar to *dui bu dui* in Chen and He (2001)'s analysis. The utterance where *ne* occurs signals that one student already gave his answer in the exercise and it invites another student to continue to the next element of the exercise. In other words, the particle *ne* has the function of a procedural discourse marker and it is used to signal transitions of interactional sequences among students at different levels of discourse and to keep the addressee's attention on teaching activities (Example 7).

EXAMPLE 7

Situation: the teacher is reviewing the four necessary steps using the method of Chinese medicine that were described in an audio recording that students have just listened to:

- 01 T: 四步, 好, 有哪四步, 记得吗?
Sì bù, hǎo, yǒu nǎ sì bù, jìde ma?
 Four step, good, there-be which four step, remember QP?
 Four steps, good, which four steps are there, remember?
- 02 S: 有望。
Yǒu wàng.
 There-be 'inspect'.
 There's 'diagnose through observation'.
- 03 T: 有望, 望就是看的意思, 还有呢?
Yǒu wàng, wàng jiù shì kàn de yìsi,
 There-be 'inspect', 'wang' exactly be see NOM meaning,
hái yǒu ne?
 in addition there-be FP?
 There's "diagnose through observation". *wang's* meaning is exactly 'diagnose through observation', what's more?

- 04 S: 闻。
Wén.
 Hear.
- 05 T: 闻是什么意思呢,
Wén shì shénme yìsi ne?
 hear be what meaning FP?
 (Then) what's the meaning of *wen*?
- 闻是听的意思, [...]
wén shì tīng de yìsi, [...]
 hear be listen NOM meaning, [...]
wen means "listen", [...]

In the interaction between the teacher and student, in the first two utterances the teacher asks the student about the four steps needed to carry out a visit using a protocol in Chinese medicine (lines 01 and 02); then, the teacher explains what is the meaning of the first step (*wàng* 望, diagnose through observation). Since the activity involves recalling the three other steps, at the end of the first step the teacher employs the utterance *hai you ne?* (line 03) to pass on to the second step: *wén* 闻 (hear) (line 04). In this way, the teacher not only requires a reply by the student, but she also gives a structure to the activity, dividing it into definite parts, so that the students know what to expect in the next step and when they will be asked to interact with the teacher to proceed with the lesson.

6. Discussion on the Pragmatic Functions of *Ne*

As shown in the examples, to answer Research Question 2, the functions of *ne* that were detected in the corpus of interactions between teachers and Chinese L2 learners correspond to the pragmatic functions identified in previous studies, with some specific features related to teaching practices recurring very frequently in my corpus, compared to other features.

As for *ne* used as a modal particle to soften the tone of the questions, its use confirms the tendency of avoiding direct questions in the interactions between teachers and students and the need by teachers to make the learning atmosphere more friendly, so that students are helped to be at their ease interacting with teachers. Moreover, I looked at the number of questions ending with *ne* that were not followed by an answer (table 2), and found out that 80 out of 116 occurrences received no answer⁸, more than half of the questions (69%). This was probably due to the specific contexts in which interrogative utterances ending with *ne* occurred, where these utterances were not aimed at receiving a reply by students, but instead had the pragmatic function of showing the epistemic stance of the teacher and soliciting the attention of students on explanations during class activity (Chen, He 2001)

⁸ I observed all cases, looking at the 50 characters that followed the question ending with *ne*: I considered the utterance as having no response if the student either didn't answer or didn't answer until after the second or third turn constructional unit reformulation of the initial question.

also highlight this function covered by *dui bu dui* in class teaching environment). This is very different from natural occurring conversation, where the speaker's and hearer's stance are really negotiated during the process (Tsai 2020), so this function could be identified as one of the specific functions of *ne* that was hypothesized in the Research Question 3 in the instructional context taken into consideration (attention maintainer).

As stated above, the least used pragmatic function found in the corpus regards the exclamative and declarative utterances terminating with particle *ne*. These kinds of utterances are usually employed by the addressee to respond to an observation by the addresser in a conversation (Li and Thompson 1981). Given the nature of this function, students never replied to questions posed by teachers using *ne*, so these kinds of utterances were mainly used by teachers to imagine situations where they had to express a contrast to explain a concept (in line with the cases described by Li 2014), but, as stated above, we seldom assist at a real negotiation of meaning in the interactions contained in my corpus, so the "response to expectation" function was almost never employed.

As far as sentence-medial occurrences of *ne* are concerned, when *ne* occurred as a topic marker after a component of an utterance, it had a clear pragmatic function, similar to the one identified by Lee-Wong (2001), Liu (2011) and Chu (2006) in natural occurring conversation, of introducing a new topic in discourse and inviting the hearer to continue interacting with the speaker. This was mainly employed in the instructional context of this corpus in the same ways as in other discursive environments. Exceptions were the use of *ne* when it followed a personal pronoun (often the second person singular or plural, as in *ni ne?* or *nimen ne?* 你们呢? (what about you (plural)?)), or another nominal topic (*rúguǒ shì Yìdàlì ne?* 如果是意大利呢? (if (it) were Italy?) in Example 4) in truncated questions. *Ne* signals the transition from a conversational turn to another and contributes to keeping the discourse well-structured and cohesive. The use of this kind of truncated question is very high and it occurred specifically when teachers carried out exercises with students and needed frequent interaction with them. To answer research question 3, I identified this use of *ne* as specific of instructional context, where *ne* gives the utterance the function of maintaining the attention of students and maintaining the lesson well-structured on top of its grammatical use.

I additionally found a specific use of the utterance *hai you ne* (what's more?): this was used as a discourse marker in a similar way to the one described above, i.e., to signal transitions between interactional sequences and to help clearly and efficaciously structure the lessons. Both teachers used this utterance, even though they came from very different sociolinguistic areas in China, demonstrating that these pragmatic uses of *ne* are not merely the habit of a single individual⁹.

⁹ As specified in the methodology section, the two teachers come from different areas of China, where different varieties of Chinese are spoken and this is an additional reason why their similar use of *ne* as a discourse marker to better structure their lessons reveals common ways of pragmatically using particle *ne*. In one of my previous studies about the pragmatic use of *dui bu dui*, instead, I found out the teacher from Beijing area preferred using *dui ma?*, instead of *dui bu dui?* with its pragmatic functions (Piccinini 2021).

In this corpus, the most commonly occurring function of *ne* was when it appeared in sentence-medial position to introduce a new topic and link it with previous content with new contrastive information. This function of *ne* has been highlighted in previous studies (Liu 2011; Chu 2006). What is interesting in this corpus is that *ne* in this position was often preceded by conjunctions that had the role of discourse markers and helped to better collocate what kind of relationship linked the preceding utterance with the one that followed. As can be seen in table 3, *ne* in sentence-medial position could be preceded by a nominal, a demonstrative or temporal expression that were used as topics to introduce the following utterances (i.e., the demonstrative *zhege* 这个, this, the noun *kōngyun* 空运, transport by air, the temporal adverb *xianzai* 现在, now, etc.). I detected 54 such cases in the corpus; the other utterances were introduced by conjunctions pragmatically used as discourse markers and either directly followed by *ne* (Example 6), or by other phrases followed by *ne*. The main conjunctions and their pragmatic values detected in the corpus were *na* and *lingwai* (but) (in addition, besides), which signal a topic change or a topic shift; *ranhou*, giving an additional value; *danshi* (but) and *keshi*, with a contrastive effect; *suoyi*, *jiieguo* (finally), introducing a consequence or a result; *rúguǒ* (if) introducing a condition, *yīnwèi* (because) followed by a cause and *shìshìshàng* (in fact) or *qíshí* (actually) with a clarifying effect. The teachers used these functions of *ne* in sentence-medial position to link previous reasoning with what preceded and to maintain the coherence of their discourse.

7. Conclusions

In this contribution I have observed the pragmatic functions covered by the UFP *ne* in a corpus of lessons given by two Chinese teachers to Italian speaking learners of Chinese FL. After reviewing previous studies on the pragmatic roles played by UFPs and by *ne* in discourse, in line with previous research, I have observed that *ne* is one of the most frequently occurring UFPs in an instructional context. I have detected different pragmatic functions of the particle *ne*, all of which were used by teachers but never by students. This confirms other studies on modal particles that found a correlation between the use of modal particles with pragmatic uses and the linguistic competence of students (Tsai, Chu 2017; Badan, Romagnoli 2019).

The pragmatic uses of *ne* highlighted by preceding studies (e.g., Lee-Wong 2001; Chu 2006; Liu 2011) are confirmed in the corpus, where *ne* is used as a discourse marker to introduce a topic change or a topic shift, maintaining the attention of the students on previous concepts and linking them to new, often contrasting information. Moreover, the data underline how *ne* also has pragmatic functions when it is syntactically mandatory. A specific function of this formative context is the use of *ne* as a topic marker when using elliptical questions terminating with particle *ne* (i.e., *nǐ ne? nimen ne?*): these questions are used by teachers as discourse markers to maintain the attention of students and to elicit their answers. In the corpus, this kind of use was also detected in the interrogative clause

hai you ne?, frequently employed by teachers with the same pragmatic uses detected for elliptical questions terminating with *ne*.

The corpus shows that students do not use *ne* because they have few chances to ask questions. As a matter of fact, classes activities are almost always teacher-dominated and although the teachers invite students to reply to their questions students rarely interact with them. For this reason, I could only observe the pragmatic functions of *ne* used by the teachers. The uses I found for particle *ne*, however, confirm its importance as a mitigator in interrogative utterances posed with the aim of soliciting the attention of students on explanations during class activity.

A limitation of this research is the fact that there are only two teachers involved in this study and this could affect the results, because the pragmatic functions of *ne* which were detected in the study could be due to individual interactional habits rather than a general phenomenon. However, the use of the pragmatic functions of *ne* are confirmed by other studies carried out in the academic environment and in teaching interactions (Chen, He 2001; Tao 2021). Moreover, the two teachers are from two different areas of China and they have been trained in different educational environments, nonetheless they employ the same pragmatic uses of *ne* in the classroom. This provides a good starting point for future research that could observe the functions of *ne* in a wider corpus.

This study demonstrates the importance of the use of the particle *ne* as a discourse marker in teaching practice. Given its importance in spoken language, studies should be carried out to identify the main uses and interactions among different pragmatic devices. Moreover, the teaching practice could develop to include the explicit reference to the discursive features of discourse markers.

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Appendix

Transcriptions conventions (adapted from Jefferson (2004) and Tsai, I-ni (2020))

>	stress or emphasis
.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
<XX>	the transcriber's inability to hear what was said
(())	author's description of the situation

Abbreviations of interlinear gloss

1SG/2SG/3SG.F/M/N	first/ second/ third person singular feminine/masculine/neutral
1PL/2PL/3PL	first/ second/ third person plural
AFF	affix
ASP	aspect marker
CL	classifier
FP	final particle
IP	initial particle
NOM	nominalizer
QP	question particle