

Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language to Beginners in an Australian University Context

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Abstract

In Australia, Chinese is recognized as one of the fastest growing languages and has one of the largest groups of non-English background speakers. A considerable number of universities, colleges and schools with different backgrounds and settings are strengthening or establishing their own Chinese language programs. However, students in different programs generally exhibit collective differences in learning objectives, motivation levels, academic abilities, learning styles, committed studying time frames and expectations of learning outcomes. How to create a better language environment to facilitate students' development of all four-macro skills in their Chinese study? What are the optimum and practical ways of adopting teaching to cater to the needs of different students' bodies? This article begins with a description of the current trends, issues and challenges of Chinese language education in the multicultural society of Australia; the second part of the article is a brief overview of teaching policies in Australia and the development of Chinese language learning; the third part of the article deals with the findings of a case study and an action research study; and the article concludes with some concrete suggestions for the design and implementation of teaching methods that facilitate effective Chinese teaching and learning.

Keywords: Multicultural, language environment, teaching and learning

Introduction

More than 1.3 billion people worldwide speak Chinese, and about 885 million of those people speak Mandarin, China's official language and dominant dialect (Aratani, 2006). One fifth of the planet speaks Mandarin, making it the most utilised language on the planet. [Chinese is ranked as the second most important business language in the world by Bloomberg Media](#). The ranking scored languages according to the number of speakers, number of countries where the language is official, along with those nations' populations, financial power, educational and literacy rates, and related measures.

China is the second largest economy in the world. China's importance to Australia has grown with China's increasing economic, political and strategic weight in the Asia-Pacific region and the global economy (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Australia has strong ties with China in many fields: the volume of their joint foreign trade is growing, academic exchanges are expanding and tourism has a new impetus. In trade and economic terms, in the 12 months to June 2009, the total value of merchandise traded between Australia and China was \$76 billion. Additionally, in 2008, there were 343,000 short term visitor arrivals by people from China, making it the fifth largest market for overseas visitors (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Increasing purchasing power in regional Asian economies especially, China has led to a dramatic increase in the number of international students from Chinese speaking countries and regions studying at universities in Australia (Liu & Lo Bianco, 2007). At June 2008, there were 66,000 Chinese students temporarily in Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2009). In the six years to June 2009, the annual number of enrolments by Chinese students in Australian institutions increased by an average of 16% per year to be 146,000 in the year to June 2009 (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Australian firms in education, telecommunications, financial services, architecture and design, tourism and environmental services are expanding their operations in China (China in the World Trade Organisation, 2002). Given these changes, generating a greater demand for people who are well aware of China/Chinese language is part of the new economic, political and social reality.

How to make the most from this opportunity brought about by the confluence of positive international situations? One necessary and practical solution is through developing language communicative competence, which opens doors to the opportunities in the worlds of business, academia, government, entertainment, etc. for non-Chinese speakers. Any country or person who is prepared to operate globally in concordance with current and expected global trends can benefit from such an initiative, both socially, economically and personally. Proficiency in a second language and intercultural awareness are seen as important personal and professional assets as we take an increasingly global perspective (Hoven & Crawford, 2009). According to a new review of research released by the Australian Council for Educational Research (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2009), the case for increased second language learning in Australia is better grounded in the personal benefits to individual learners than in arguments about economic and social benefits. As Messimeri (2009) argued that those learning new languages gain a greater appreciation and insight into the culture of the language they are learning. The recent Federal Government Bradley Review of Higher Education conceded that: “knowledge of other cultures and their languages is an essential life skill for future graduates if they are to engage effectively in global professional practice” (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008, p. 104).

In America, according to a report of the Modern Language Association, American students in colleges and universities enrolled in foreign-language courses have jumped 13 percent since 2002, while in Australia, between 2002 and 2006, the number of students studying Chinese grew by more than 50 percent (Howard, 2008). In 2006, 60% of the Chinese born local population spoke Mandarin at home while 29% spoke Cantonese and 4% spoke English (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2009). So the Chinese language is a significant community language spoken by a growing number of Australians (Messimeri, 2009). As Orton (2008) argued, “to develop the present relationship with this country, China, to great mutual economic and social benefit would require a solid pool of Australians in a range of sectors who deeply understand China and who can speak Chinese well.” Thus, the task of increasing the number of Australian students who can speak Chinese proficiently and can demonstrate an understanding of Chinese culture is crucial. Messimeri (2009) also pointed out that the need for greater cross cultural understanding between the Australian and Chinese nations is obvious as is the need for greater cross cultural understanding between Chinese-Australians and longer established communities in Australia.

Background

Australia has been at the forefront among English-speaking nations in the area of language policy and language-in-education policy (Richard, Baldauf, & Djite, 2000). The National Policy on Languages (NPL) (Lo Bianco, 1987) was Australia's first policy on Languages, and was indeed the first of such policies in the world in an English speaking country. It provided a broad educational, social and cultural rationale for the study of Languages. It was instrumental in providing national direction, particularly in promoting the study of a second language for all students, and in advocating for access to and maintenance of the first language for students of non-English speaking backgrounds, this provided substantial funding to support the teaching of key Asian languages including Chinese, apart from other traditionally taught European languages. Then there were a few other policies worth mentioning, such as in the early 1990s, a new policy entitled Australia's Language: the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP) was implemented (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1991a, 1991b); in 1994, another program entitled the National Languages and Australia's Economic Future (NALSAS) was introduced into the education system at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels (Rudd, National Asian Languages & Cultures Working Group (Australia), & Council of Australian Governments, 1994). Both ALLP and NALSAS put more stress on Asian literacy for Australian students. Asia literacy in the 21st Century is increasingly critical to Australia. This has been highlighted at the 2020 Summit held in 2008, and is strongly supported by the federal government. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has made 'Asia Literacy' a key goal for his government. Rudd considers the 'rise of China' as the greatest event and policy challenge for the coming century, and stated his commitment to make Australia 'the most Asia-literate country in the West'. In 2009, the \$6.24 million Becoming Asia Literate: Grants to Schools was a key element of the Rudd Government's National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) (Australian Council of State School Organisations, 2009). The then Education Minister, Julia Gillard stated, “... understanding Asia and its languages is a priority. The onward march of globalization makes this challenge ever more urgent. By the time Australian students leave school they should have a sound knowledge of Asia – its geography, history, peoples, cultures, and languages”, at the *Asia Literacy For Every Young Australian* national summit in Mel-

bourne in May 2009 and in launching the [NALSSP program](#) (Asia Education Foundation, 2009). With a focus on Mandarin, Japanese, Korean and Indonesian languages and cultures this is a real boost to Asia literacy (Australian Council of State School Organisations, 2009).

Correspondingly, Chinese language learning is promoted from China through the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCFL), also known as the Office of Chinese Language Council International and in Chinese as Hanban. To list a few examples: Confucius Institutes, volunteer teachers and the Chinese Bridge Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign College Students. The Ministry of Education's website clearly states that:

Teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) is an integral part of China's reform and opening up drive. To promote TCFL is of strategic significance to popularize the Chinese language and culture throughout the world, to enhance the friendship and mutual understanding as well as the economic and cultural cooperation and exchanges between China and other countries around the world, and to elevate China's influence in the international community (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, with the continuing growth of China's economy, more and more people from all over the world are learning Chinese in order to conduct business and access China's huge markets. The Chinese language is becoming increasingly popular worldwide, with as many as 40 million people now learning it as a second language (People's Daily Online, 2009). In the United States, Chinese is identified as a language critical to the US now and in the future (Wang, 2007). Similarly, for several decades, Chinese studies in Australia has enjoyed an enviable reputation internationally for its teaching and research on China and the teaching of Mandarin Chinese in Australian universities made considerable progress in the 1990s (Asian Studies Association of Australia, 2002). The demand from students wishing to learn Chinese is growing strongly across the nation from preschool to university levels (Australian Council of State School Organisations, 2008). Data from both the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (1997) Review and the State and Nature report found that the top six languages (Japanese, Italian, Indonesian, French, German and Mandarin Chinese - in that order) are learnt by over 90% of learners (92.1% in 2001 and 90.5% in 2005).

There is growing recognition that China is now highly significant to Australia's future and that this poses challenges for Education in the area of language learning and studies of China (Orton, 2008). Obviously, there still may be obstacles to Chinese language learning. As Liu & Lo Bianco (2007) outline a number of issues exacerbated by the increasing popularity of Chinese language learning in the Australian context such as grouping learners, continuity of programs across different levels of schooling and catering for background learners. Chinese has been said to be the most difficult language to learn in the world; whether to listen to, to speak, to read, or to write, there is so much fundamental difference between English and Chinese. Just as Orton (2008) summarised Chinese has four challenges for the English speaking learner in terms of intrinsic language difficulties; tones, homophones, characters and the system of particles and verb complements. Additionally, in the United States, the Centre for Applied Linguistics' research shows that students who learn foreign languages score better on standardized tests, are more resistant to stereotypes, and feel more comfortable interacting with people from other cultures. However, Chinese is one of the most challenging of foreign languages for a student to learn. The Asia Society, a non-profit organization that builds ties between the United States and Asia, aims to have at least five percent of American high school students learning Chinese by 2015.

Two studies

A Case Study

A case study was conducted to examine first year Chinese language learning experience in a university context, which serves to offer some insight into the student experience of studying Chinese within a university language program setting, the potential of online pedagogies for the teaching of writing characters and the way in which creative, authentic teaching builds a context for learning. All participants were in their first semester of study and were undertaking Arts undergraduate programs.

The aim of this study was to explore some practical aspects of language education, to consider these aspects in terms of language studies and to enable students to develop their individual abilities to improve their language learning. This ability helps students to learn another language effectively. A questionnaire was the tool used in this study. It was designed to collect two broad types of information: background information from each respondent about their personal and demographic characteristics

and information relating to respondents' experiences of Chinese language learning. A total of 32 students participated in this study. A seventeen-item questionnaire was developed to collect descriptive data about the participants. Results of the questionnaire revealed that the majority of all respondents were aged between 19-45 years (72%), and female students (68%) were outnumbered by male (31%). All of them were doing the first year of their undergraduate study, the educational specialization of these students was mainly Arts (75%), and the second major area of study was Diploma of Languages (Chinese).

In summary, the illuminative evaluation reported in this case study provided data about these students' experiences of learning Chinese in a university setting. The key issues raised are summarised here. In general, students felt satisfied with their first year of Chinese learning. More than half of the respondents said that they enjoy their study. It is interesting to see that a larger percentage of students showed their interest in China/Chinese people and their way of life, and that approximately half of the students said they would like to meet and talk with more people by utilizing their Chinese language skill. Agreement on the value of the study was very high on some questions, such as, more than 50 percent of respondents indicated that they were active in the Internet and the various online tools and software available. More than 80 percent of respondents declared that they were putting a large amount of time into practicing Chinese. However, there were approximately 30 percent of respondents said that they only studied sometimes, for various reasons. Moreover, more than half of respondents pointed out the great importance of having a language partner, while 25 percent of them considered this less important. Regarding the scale of four macro-skills, more than half of the respondents put their reading and writing skills first, then listening and speaking; compared to 25 percent of them feeling more confident about their listening and speaking skills rather than their reading and writing.

Concerning challenges and concerns students have experienced or identify regarding Chinese language learning, respondents had divergent views on this matter. Students commonly made common remarks about their Chinese learning experience along the lines of: "The challenge is to learn and understand a totally different language and culture. The logic of Chinese is different from that of English. The construction of a paragraph in Chinese is according to a more regulated style."

Considering what they enjoy most about first year Chinese learning, the responses indicated that a clear majority of students saw it is a vibrant program with practical value, which was both educational and enjoyable. As a result, the majority of them were in favour of working in a group or with the help of each other, primarily because they enjoyed the process of working with partners and sharing their learning experiences with their peers. The majority of these students revealed that they would have liked more contact with other students. Here are some of the remarks: "I enjoy learning languages other than English. I love the challenge of the feeling of being able to speak to foreigners. Chinese is a good challenge. Learning about Chinese culture, I like the structure, easy to know what is expected. Experience of learning a language helps me gain my confidence."

There is no doubt that the learners in this case study have dynamically engaged with the learning materials and each other. Since the data pool was fairly limited, the results of this study pertain only to a first year Chinese program at a university. Some further studies need to be done in this field to explore a more effective way to attract and take learners to new language learning environments.

An Action Research Study

An action research study was conducted to examine the significance of teaching authentic materials in a language classroom. Participants from a local college and a university, who enrolled in the same beginning level Chinese language program, were invited to participate in workshops-teaching Chinese by singing, to experience this flexible and less stressful approach of learning a second language. The results of the workshops which were twofold, first, to determine whether or not students embrace this approach; second, if there are differences among the participants as they relate to this pedagogical approach. Finally the conclusion was reached that the implementation of this methodological approach is practical, feasible and enjoyable for the participants. There were differences between these two groups in terms of their performances within the classroom; however, both groups showed that this methodology was beneficial in Chinese language learning.

The attempt to teach by singing was to allow students to learn simultaneously through different learning modalities-visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. The theoretical basis is that the more sensory organs engaged, the more learning will take place and the more impressive and effective the learning will be. This active learning enormously helps language recognition, acquisition and retention (Gadzikowski, 2007). According to Jolly (1975, p. 11) songs possess both "the communication aspect of music" and because they are often tied to emotions and ideas, songs become "a direct route to the basic values of

the culture” (p. 14). It was crucial that at the beginning stage, learning Chinese was to be interesting so that students’ interest was sparked and retained, the motivation for learning was enhanced and their enthusiasm was maintained.

The subjects for this study were 26 students (21 females and 5 male) of two categories: 8 college students aged between 12-19 years old and 18 university students, among whom two were teenagers while the others were, aged from 20-59 years old. All the male students were within the university group. The time they had spent on learning Chinese language varied from 1 year to 5 years, which resulted in diverse Chinese language levels. Only one of the university students had learnt Chinese for 3 years while the others had all studied for just 1 year. Among the college students, one had studied Chinese for 2 years, another 4 years, and the other 6 students had 5 years of Chinese language learning experience. The great mass of learners was fond of singing, only one student in the university group reported that he personally disliked singing. There were other discrepancies among the students, such as: Chinese background knowledge, ability of imitation, love of music, personal preference of songs, degree of acceptance, personality, motivation.

The data for this study was collected during a two-hour face-to-face workshop. In the workshop, songs with simple lyrics were picked. The language was basic, and the tunes were catchy. Many activities were designed and conducted to actively engage the whole class and facilitate interaction between teachers and students so that their communicative competence would be improved. The participants were also provided with the synopsis, lyrics and vocabularies of each song and at the end of the workshop, they were asked to complete four different types of written exercises. In addition, there were pre-test and post-test at the beginning and end of the workshop. The pre-test was to inform us of the participants’ Chinese language level, while the post-test indicated the outcomes of learning from this workshop.

The satisfactory results of the workshops were shown by the participants’ feedback. Comments provided by the participants were used directly to provide insights into their perceptions towards this particular approach and also their reflections on the significant role of utilizing authentic teaching materials in a language classroom setting. According to what the participants’ reactions, the method was enjoyable, interesting, and motivating. They pointed out that it helped with memory retention, and it was a good way to broaden vocabularies. Here are several examples, *“It’s easier for me to memorise words with singing rather than just trying to memorise words. It helps me to remember words and is more fun than just reading and writing it out over and over.”* *“Learning Chinese by singing is actually help(ful).”* *“It’s fun. (It) Helps you remember words and sentence patterns.”* Surprisingly, some responded with beautifully handwritten Chinese, like ‘太好了!’ (‘Fantastic!’), ‘很好!’ (‘Terrific!’), ‘好’ (‘Good!’).

Based on the feedback collected from the tests, it was revealed that this approach is practical, feasible and enjoyable for the participants. The overwhelming majority of the students have a strong preference for this method. Only one student was not positive and this was for a personal reason. As mentioned earlier, there were differences between these two groups in terms of classroom performances, but neither of them indicated that they were not in favour of this method in Chinese language learning.

In summary, as the two studies have been conducted exclusively in the field of Chinese language education, it is clear from the review that all materials are based on the studies of a tertiary institution as well as a college. In other words, all the information was confined to research with small samplings. Further research could be conducted using a larger sample size and more refined research instruments, to increase the statistical power of the data. Therefore, these studies should be regarded as preliminary investigations, and further research is needed before it is possible to generalise the findings.

Conclusion

In this article, I started with a general review of Chinese language education in Australia. Later the implications of two particular studies were discussed. The insights drawn from the studies have allowed us to propose a course redevelopment which will be conceived and designed so that other strategies can add both flexibility and learning enhancement to the face-to-face teaching and also in the near future to develop the program for online delivery.

As a result, it is possible to make a couple of suggestions on addressing the issues: technology-enhanced language teaching and learning; and the emphasis on cultural integration into beginning Chinese language programs; the value of the effect of having a language partner; the significance of an in-country program.

Without a doubt, technology has revolutionized society in many places around the globe, including how language instruction is taught and delivered. As Warschauer and Healey (1998) argued, more developments in networked communication, multimedia and artificial intelligence will certainly create a potentially crucial role for the computer for language exploration and use in the second language classroom. Technological and pedagogical developments now allow us to more fully integrate computer technology into the language learning process (Rahimpour, 2011). Therefore, using multiple teaching techniques will positively provide an inclusive learning environment for the diverse groups of Chinese language students at this university and support their development as independent learners. Most recently, the development of a comprehensive, flexible teaching and learning resources definitely served the purpose of accompanying the learning process and enabling students to independently practise and improve their Chinese writing and reading skills.

In most cases in language learning, there was little explicit connection between the classroom and the world outside it. Larsen-Freeman and Freeman (2008) echoed this idea, they stated that language learning in classrooms bore little or no connection to language learning or language use in the world outside of school. In the context of this university, one attempt to address this problem came in a Chinese history, society and culture component at the beginning level Chinese class. It is noteworthy that the students had positive attitudes toward each single element introduced in the course. In students' teaching and learning evaluation, they indicated that the cultural components provided them with better insights into the context of the target language. They also gained social and psychological advantages with increased cultural awareness. In future teaching, multiple cultural elements can be utilized to address students' different interests and learning styles as well as to maximize the benefits derived from the relevant cultural materials available at the university. Future studies could also explore the potential to incorporate cultural activities into the language classroom to cater for different levels, which enables to encourage and enhance learners to develop intercultural awareness. Further studies can be conducted to investigate the impact of different cultural elements on the cultural proficiency of Chinese language learners through a variety of assessment procedures.

Undoubtedly, having a language partner can assist students with vocabularies and dialogue drills helps to correct pronunciation and grammar mistakes, assists students to develop sensitivity to language learning, and integrate students into daily life conversations. Ideally, Chinese language students should be paired with Chinese students, perhaps a Chinese language exchange friend, with similar academic backgrounds and interests.

In the language teaching community there is unanimous agreement that in-country study of the language is critical to true proficiency. The immersion experience brings about a significant improvement in the way students approach language learning. Without doubt, a successful in-country program can: provide an effective means of helping students gain deeper insights into the local society; improve their language skills intensively through exposure to colloquial language in a real Chinese lifestyle environment; understands the value of intercultural communication; and learn to think critically about their own culture and behaviours in the contexts of different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, students will also have opportunities to improve character development by learning to become more tolerant, adaptable, and confident. Chinese immersion programs are among the fastest-growing areas of language education in American schools (Met, 2012).

From my personal study and teaching experience involved in different levels of schooling and a variety of educational settings, I came to believe that learning a foreign language and having interpersonal contact with native speakers from that culture definitely helps one receive a profound education. According to a well-known Chinese proverb, the best education consists of "reading ten thousand books and travelling ten thousand miles." As language teachers, we are fundamentally concerned with how language works in communication: with the relationships between utterance and context, language and culture, language and personality, and with language as action (Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2002; Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Gumperz, 1982; Nelson, Freedman, & Anderson, 2001). The tonal language with its characters bearing no resemblance to European scripts makes it one of the most complicated languages in the world to learn. In this context, more efficient and effective ways of learning the language are of vital importance. The goal for teaching Chinese is to develop students' ability to apply speaking, listening, reading and writing skills in this language. Moreover, language teaching is not just teaching language itself, it is embedded with cultural meaning. The development of multiple language skills is needed to teach students Chinese as well as its associated culture. In the field of second/foreign language acquisition, the main focus is to cultivate students' communicative competence in real-life situations. It is hoped that these rich insights will motivate and inform teachers of Chinese to take on the task of designing and developing meaningful programs for students.

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