Review of "Teaching and Learning Chinese in Higher Education: Theoretical and Practical Issues"

Title	Teaching and Learning Chinese in Higher Education: Theoretical and Practical Issues
Author	Yang Lu
Year of Publication	2017
ISBN	9781138697676
No. of Pages	257 pp.
Place of Publication	London, UK, and New York, USA
Publisher	Routledge

Reviewed by Daniel Kwang Guan Chan (National University of Singapore, Singapore) and Hock Huan Goh (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)

With the growing opportunities in the China market, Mandarin Chinese (MC) has been widely taught in many institutions of higher education (HE) in Europe and around the world. However, the teaching and learning (T&L) of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) is definitely challenging due to the unique features of the language, and has been perceived as difficult by both teachers and learners in Europe. This is in part due to the logographic nature of written MC, which requires different ways of T&L as compared to the phonographic nature of the European learners' written native languages. Other obstacles include the way Chinese characters have to be written (i.e. stroke by stroke in a specific order), the lack of consistent standardisation for learners' proficiency levels of MC, and consequently, the inadequacy of current T&L materials as well as assessment methods. In the perspective of exploring possible solutions to such challenges, this volume gathers efforts of educators and researchers of CFL in Europe, particularly in the UK, to contribute findings from interdisciplinary studies on the T&L of MC.

The book is divided into 4 distinct parts, namely (1) proficiency benchmarking and assessment (including the suitability of the Common European Framework of Reference or CEFR for languages), (2) instructional materials and curriculum, (3) pedagogy and innovative classroom practices, as well as (4) learners' profiling and interlanguage. Parts I and IV contain two chapters each, while parts II and III contain three chapters each, making up a total of 10 chapters. Although all the chapters focus on data collected from cases of CFL programmes in institutions of HE in the UK, the same issues and challenges can be considered to be relevant for teachers and learners of CFL throughout the world, and would hence be an excellent read for any researcher, practitioner or education specialist in the disciplinary field of CLF.

Part I of the book, containing its first two chapters, deal with the thorny issue of the standardisation of language competence levels, which in turn determine how CFL competence at those various levels should be benchmarked and assessed.

The first chapter gives an overview of issues relating to the teaching and learning of written Chinese, such as the relevance of learning how to handwrite Chinese characters in the modern era where Chinese characters can be input using a computer, the possibility of recognizing Pinyin as a form of written Chinese competency, and the fact that a character can either be a lexical item (like 水 'water') or a component of a longer word (like 水果 'fruit'). The chapter points out that current frameworks of CFL competence, such as the CEFR, ACTFL and HSK, have been inadequate in resolving the above-mentioned problems, presenting instead the European Benchmarking Chinese Language (EBCL) as a written competence standard in both Pinyin and Chinese characters at A1 and A2 levels. In particular, it highlights the need for not one, but two types of recommended reference vocabulary lists, to be attached with CEFR competence levels descriptors: one for characters and another for lexical items. On the whole, this chapter provides evidence that the benchmarking of written Chinese competence can be successful and can serve to standardise the T&L of CFL not just in Europe, but perhaps also internationally.

The second chapter looks at the situation whereby universities in the UK have benchmarked their CFL assessment criteria against the CEFR and the HSK, and investigated if and to what extent there is a correlation between HSK level 3 and 4 exams and CFL courses at B1 and B2 levels. To do so, the author conducted a study to compare the criterion-validity of HSK Levels 3 and 4 and the CEFR Independent User levels (Bl and B2) assessment criteria. By comparing test scores and computing correlations between the scores of two institutional summative assessments, the author found that there are some content relevance and criteria relatedness between the HSK Level 3 and the UK CFL programme, except for listening and reading. Meanwhile higher correlations were found between HSK Level 4 content and the two institutions. However, the content coverage and criteria for writing was weakly correlated between the HSK and the institutions' assessments. From this study, we learn there is as yet no absolute correlation between the level of language competence reached and the marks obtained in standardised proficiency exams, and that more effort will be needed before a better alignment between standardised Chinese exams and CEFR competence levels can be reached, in order to both serve the needs of CFL and be a point of reference for Chinese proficiency assessment outside China.

Summing up Part I, the first two chapters discuss the dilemmas and confusions faced by CFL practitioners, learners and other stakeholders from a qualitative and a quantitative aspect. Qualitatively, the vagueness of descriptors in the various standards are highlighted, and quantitatively, the misalignment between institution assessment and the worldwide standards are revealed. Findings from these two studies bring to the limelight the current diversified standardizations of Chinese competence in China and Europe which are confusing and leaving stakeholders more or less in chaos. Though attempts have been made in these studies to improve the situation, further and stronger effort should be asserted to ensure that consensus can be reached among different regions of CFL.

The next three chapters that form Part II of the book are concerned with cultural aspects of CFL T&L, analysing the image of Chinese speakers presented in CFL textbooks (in Chapter Three), debating the importance of including *chengyu* (成語) in CFL classrooms (in Chapter Four) and evaluating an experimental method for the acquisition of number-related metaphors in MC.

The third chapter takes the starting point that learning materials and learners' identity formation are closely linked (Cao & Tian, 2012), and that foreign language learning involves a process in which learners' identities are being negotiated, expanded and developed (Norton & McKinney, 2011). In examining the alignment between the content presented in CFL learning materials and the actual communication that is likely to be encountered by CFL learners in their social encounters with native MC speakers, special attention is drawn to the stereotyping of learners' and first language speakers' image portrayed in the learning materials. The practicality and authenticity of communication scenarios presented in them are questioned, and the appropriateness of learners' identity being formed as a result is scrutinized. Based on the *Bifocal Operational Model* that the author developed, conversations taken from three CFL textbooks used in the UK were analysed. Some conversations appear to present a highly unlikely mismatch between the speakers' linguistic competence and sociocultural competence, while some characters present cases of cultural stereotyping,

inconsistent with the likely identities of speakers in authentic situations. Then there is the problem of mismatches whereby plausibly different characters with exactly the same name are presented as playing inconsistent and conflicting roles, causing a potential confusion in the CFL learner. The findings of this study strongly indicate that CFL developers and practitioners should consider more vigilantly the functioning and dynamics of identity construction when developing and delivering content in learning materials, and be more aware of intertwined relationships between the target language and culture on one hand, and the learners' identity on the other.

The fourth chapter focuses on the interesting issue of incorporating *chengyu* (成語) idioms into the teaching and learning of CFL. This chapter reports results from two surveys. The first is a gap-fill language test administered to 530 native speakers online to gather their responses on sentences in colloquial and informal style to assess their use of idioms in the given situations. The second is a questionnaire sent to 23 CFL teachers in UK universities to gather their opinions on teaching idioms to their students. The results from the first survey show that native speakers do use idioms in the given situations even without any prompts, and that there is sociocultural consensus among the speakers on the choice of idioms, thereby highlighting the importance for CFL learners to study idioms. The results from the second survey, however, show that teachers are not very supportive of explicit instruction for this language component, as they feel that CFL learners are still at the novice stage, struggling to master basic language proficiency, while idioms are considered to be too "luxurious" for them, in view of their limited course duration. The author argues that independent implicit learning tends to be counterproductive and that further research is needed on how to efficiently integrate this aspect of the language in explicit classroom teaching.

The fifth chapter stems from the observation that the cultural input from existing CFL textbooks and pedagogy is anecdotal, superficial and unsatisfactory. It articulates an experimental attempt that explored the benefits of the *deep-rooted cultural input* (DrCI) over the *conventional cultural input* (CCI) for the teaching of number-related metaphors. Learners from different levels of CFL learning proficiency were divided into experimental and control groups and taught Chinese number-related metaphors using one of the two above-mentioned input methods. The experimental groups were provided with the DrCI, whereas the control groups were provided with the CCI for two weeks. Results of the experiment show that DrCI is more effective than the CCI when the metaphors are more difficult, and DrCI also helps students' retention of intonation when the metaphors cannot be fully explained by CCI. More significantly, the results demonstrate that both novice CFL learners and experienced CFL learners are equally able to understand DrCI and apply the metaphor concept accordingly. In short, the DrCI method seems able to convey cultural concepts despite a prerequisite on language proficiency level. This method will definitely merit further exploration in other CFL settings, and also other L2 learning environments.

In sum, Part II looked at two prominent issues in the instructional materials, namely, the stereotyping of learners in the textbooks, and the appropriateness of learning culturally-rich contents (such as idioms and metaphors). These issues, especially the latter, are indeed important and persistent issues in the teaching of Chinese, both as a foreign language or as a community language among Chinese in Southeast Asia. Though findings in these studies are preliminary in view of the limited samples these studies could access, some findings are still referential to policy-maker, curriculum developers and practitioners of Chinese language at large.

Part III contains three chapters and presents creative teaching methodologies for CFL in the context of higher education, including visual simulations for the learning of Chinese characters, bootstrapping for teacher trainees, and an online learning system.

The sixth chapter demonstrated how a teaching methodology based on a visual simulation approach (VSA) can be adopted and designed for more effective acquisition of Chinese characters while nurturing learners' visual capacity to make visual and cognitive interconnections between images, sounds and lexicon, and between colour coding and grammatical structures, while potentially bypassing the CFL learners' tendency to code-switch between their alphabetical first languages and the logographic Chinese language. The VSA model distinguishes between *shící* (實詞)

or lexical items and *xūcí* (虛詞) or grammatical words. Based on this distinction, it uses colour coding cues to enable learners to see structural patterns in Chinese lexical items – for example between three sub-types of Chinese verbs: single-syllabic (e.g. mǎi (買) 'to buy'), double-syllabic (喜歡 xǐhuān 'to like'), and non-object-taking double-syllabic (e.g. chànggē (唱歌) 'to sing') – and to learn Chinese syntax – for example, the insertion of an aspectual marker like *guo* (過) in double-syllabic verbs (e.g. xǐhuān-guo 喜歡過 vs. chàng-guo gē 唱過歌). Comparing the learning outcomes using the traditional approach and the VSA model approach after 18, 42 and 60 hours of teaching, the latter showed significant improvements in students' performance in terms of reading comprehension, writing and grammatical accuracy and complexity, on the semantic, lexical and syntactic levels.

The seventh chapter explored the method of "bootstrapping", that is, by making students take up the roles of the teacher and the learner alternatively, hence enabling a self-sustaining learning process based on Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). After reviewing crucial notions such as mediated learning, implicit mediation, peer teaching, learner autonomy and motivation, the authors described a conceptual model (taken from Liu, 2014) to explain how bootstrapping provides a social context for a dynamic and cyclical ZPD, seen as the potential space for continuous learning – the gradual maturation of the "Ideal L2 Self" – with the help of the more knowledgeable peers. They conducted a study on trainee teachers (TT) in a language pedagogy module, who would take turns in groups to generate a ZPD by preparing a teaching session for the TT peers. This is done with guidance from the course lecturer who would only do the final checking of pronunciation, learning resources and teaching materials. The findings showed that the peer teaching model ("boot-strapping") not only helped TT to better understand the learner-centred teaching practice and the importance of learner responsibility for acquiring or learning an L2, but also helped them in their roles as teachers and beginner learners of Chinese by creating more and better learning opportunities. They further point to the necessity of group interaction for creating a sense of group solidarity, that in turn aids self-sustaining independent learning. Applying these results to a typical CFL classroom where learners are of different levels, the peer co-teaching model can foster active participation, build motivation and promote learner autonomy. This means that successful language learning can be better achieved through teaching methodologies that makes learners interact with each other, while nurturing motivation, autonomy and mediated learning.

The eighth chapter reported on the impact of a Chinese Online Self-Assessment (COS) system for improving and assessing grammatical competence as well as independent learning of CFL learners and teachers, despite a lack of contact hours for teaching. The authors refer to the constructivist model for grammar teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 2015) and the theory of Dynamic Assessment (DA) according to which learning occurs through DA in learners' ZPD (Poehner & Lantolf, 2013). In fact, online learning systems provide the possibility of online DA, which is a form mediation outside the classroom for learners to support the learners' ZPD in achieving their learning outcomes. In this case, the COS system was developed specifically to assist in the teaching and learning of Chinese grammar in one UK university through the existing Moodle platform. Developed for five language levels (from Beginners to Advanced) with four formative assessments (for language practice) and two summative assessments (for language testing) at each level, hints (*pinyin*, meaning of a difficult phrase and detailed grammar notes) are built into the practice questions to help weaker students. For every one or two failed attempts, learners are prompted to re-visit what has been taught through self-study. A study on the performance of students revealed that their grammatical competence improved, but also that they were spending more time with higher frequency on the system, and hence developing learner autonomy through the system. On the other hand, the development and use of the COS system enabled teachers to reflect on their classroom teaching as well as how to integrate technology into their teaching, and help them better understand their students' learning process and difficulties.

All three chapters in Part III offer solutions to the time-strapped situation of CFL courses in higher education. Indeed, this area of research is worthy of our attention, all the more because the learning of a logographic language like Chinese involves not only more instructional time, but also developing competences in learners that are more cognitively complex, as compared to the learning of alphabetical languages like English. They jointly point to the need to improve teaching, through

the use of technology, increased interaction between learners and online mediation beyond the classroom, in order for learning to be improved.

The final part of the book consisting of two chapters focuses on the advanced CFL learner and his written language development, with the Chapter 9 looking at error analysis and Chapter 10 at how classroom instruction can improve learners' syntactic accuracy and complexity.

The ninth chapter provides details on an error-analysis study which incorporates students' perceptions of their own errors, which were classified at the discourse, syntactic and lexical levels. Looking in particular at argument-based writing by upper-intermediate to advanced level CFL learners (corresponding to A-Level or CEFR B2 level Chinese), the authors not only wanted to know what kinds of common errors are being made, but also their perceptions towards such essay writing in terms of their understanding of how to structure a good essay, the difficulties they encountered, and the kinds of feedback they received for improving their essays. The study revealed errors such as the lack of introductions and conclusions, the inability to construct complex sentences involving structures that were significantly different from the students' L1, and the confusion between lexical items that have similar meanings as well as functional words. The survey revealed that their perceived difficulties at the lexical level are consistent with their performance at this level, but what they perceive as difficult at the discourse and syntactic level does not always match what is shown in their writing. These advanced learners also generally think that language quality is less important than the content of an argument-based essay and that they prefer errors to be highlighted with comments rather being given the corrected forms as in traditional way of marking essays. The results in this study have highlighted the benefits of using error analysis to find out what problems students are struggling with in their learning so as to devise methodologies that target these problems, as well as the need to find out their preferred type of feedback which can in turn improve their target language performance.

Last but not least, the tenth chapter looks at the effect of classroom instruction on syntactic accuracy and complexity in CFL through the analysis of the T-unit (or "minimal terminal unit"), which the author adopts as an "objective and reliable measure of writing development in terms of grammatical and lexical accuracy and syntactic complexity" (p. 244). Previously proposed by Hunt (1970) for measuring learner's interlanguage in L2 English, the Chinese equivalent for the T-unit has been defined by Jiang (2013, p. 5) as a "single main clause that contains one independent predicate plus whatever other subordinate clauses or non-clauses [that] are attached to, or embedded within, that one main clause". By looking at the number of error-free T-units (for accuracy) and T-unit length (for complexity), the author seeks to find out how a 10-week period of instructed learning can affect the T-analysis of accuracy and complexity. The results show that while there is an increase in syntactic complexity, the accuracy in CFL written production has suffered under instructed language learning. The author attributes it to the likelihood that learners became more risk-taking when faced with more challenging writing tasks involving topics with abstract ideas and challenging terminologies. The implications of this research is that explicit classroom instruction can contribute to improving syntactic complexity, through rote-learning of lexical items, collocations and sentences.

Both chapters in Part IV offer perspectives on how best to help students develop their writing skills, one looking at error correction and the other looking at the input hypothesis. The focus of learners' interlanguage at the advanced level is a refreshing and timely one, given that most of the current research concentrate on initial learning stages of writing, and also in view of the recent increase in the number of advanced students of CFL around the world and the growing popularity of Chinese due to the rise of China as a potential global power.

All in all, although the book presents data from HE contexts in the UK, the issues presented are highly applicable to any other CFL and even foreign language teaching contexts around the world. At the same time, in spite of the limitations in data collected and methodologies, the highly engaging research topics that are found in this volume should incite and inspire further research in the same and other related areas in foreign language education. This volume is therefore a valuable contribution, in particular, to CFL applied linguistics, but also to foreign language education research in general.

References

Cao, Q., & Tian, H. (2012). Language, discourse and identity in globalized China. In Q. Cao & H. Tian (Eds.), *Reinventing identities: The poetics of language use in contemporary China* (pp. 1–15). Tianjing: Nankai University Press.

Hunt, K. W. (1970). Recent measures in syntactic development. In M. Lester (Ed.), *Readings in applied Transformational Grammar* (pp. 187–200). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Jiang, W. (2013). Measurements of development in L2 written production: The case of L2 Chinese. *Applied Linguistics, 34*(1), 1–24.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2015). Research into practice: Grammar learning and teaching. *Language Learning*, *48*(2), 263–280.

Liu, W. (2014). *The exploration of reciprocal peer coteaching in a Chinese course: An action research project on language teacher education* (Unpublished PhD thesis). Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland.

Norton P. B., & McKinney, C. (2011). An identity approach to second language acquisition. In D. Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative approaches to second language acquisition* (pp. 73–94). London: Routledge.

Poehner, M., & Lantolf, J. (2013). Bringing the ZPD into the equation: Capturing L2 development during computerized dynamic assessment (C-DA). *Language Teaching Research*, *17*(3), 323–342.