



Review of “The NFLC Guide for Basic Chinese Language Programs”

Author	Cornelius Kubler
Contributors	Yung-O Big, George C. Henrichson, Cornelius C. Kubler, A. Ronald Walton, Margaret M. Wong, Wei-Ling Wu & Clara Yu
Year of Publication	2006 (second edition); first published 1997
ISBN	978-0-87415-071-1
No. of Pages	196 pp.
Place of Publication	Columbus
Publisher	National East Asian Languages Resource Center, Ohio State University
Series	Pathways to Advanced Skills, Vol. III

Reviewed by Weiping Wu

1 Introduction

This book, as indicated by the title, is a guide for key players in the United States who are involved with teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), including both teachers and program administrators. The brief review provided here will focus on the first two parts of the *Guide*, as the concepts and discussion in these chapters can also be used as a reference by practitioners in the CFL field elsewhere in the world.

2 Major components of the book

In addition to the three main parts, *Background and Assumptions* in teaching CFL, a description and discussion on an *Ideal Program* in this field, and *Common Local Conditions* with special reference to the United States, this *Guide* also provides an *Executive Summary* in both English and Chinese, which affords an overview and highlights the key points of the book. Readers who are pressed for time can just read this summary for the gist of the whole *Guide*. Also relevant, and therefore worth mentioning here, is that this *Guide* was first published in 1997 as volume III of the Pathway to Advanced Skills series. Now that a second edition of this volume is published (2006) and well received, it is not difficult for us to realize that many of the principles and concepts expounded in this *Guide* still exercise great influence in our field.

3 Key points and recommendations

The characteristics of this *Guide* can be summarized in the following aspects: (1) the foundation approach, (2) the recognition of language as part of culture and culture as an integrated part of language teaching, (3) the insightful discussion on some controversial issues, such as acts versus facts, or simplified versus traditional Chinese characters, (4) the stress on the importance of how to

learn instead of what to learn, (5) the advice to put the teaching and assessment of the four skills in context, and (6) the user-friendly feature of putting recommendations at the end of major sections.

The Foundation Approach: Defining the proficiency level of Chinese is perhaps as hard as learning the Chinese language itself, and this is true not just for English-speaking learners, but for all of us who are somehow involved in this field. Three other approaches, namely the seat-time, the inventory and the outcome, are briefly described and dismissed due to the various limitations that come with each approach. The “Foundation Approach”, as proposed in this *Guide*, implies “the creation of a foundation or base upon which the learner will build in the future” (p. 59). Major components of the language, such as the sound system with various transcription conventions and stroke order in writing, are then cited as examples within this “foundation”. By proposing such an approach, the author avoids the endless and often fruitless debates on what to include and what not in a Basic Chinese Program. According to the author, “foundation” refers to the “initial stages of a wide range of learning paths,” especially the path on “learning how to learn”. To the disappointment of many teachers and learners, however, what exactly these “initial stages” may cover is hard to discern from the *Guide*.

Language versus culture: in contrast to many other books on language learning, the *Guide* talks about “language in culture” (p. 51) and treats culture as an integrated part of the learning process, rather than an add-on. Following such recognition, it is then much more appropriate, from the perspectives of both curriculum design and pedagogy, to refer to communication conventions within the Chinese culture and broader issues like cross-cultural communication.

Insight on controversial issues: It is not difficult to understand, from the insightful discussion on many controversial issues, that the *Guide* is proposing a pragmatic approach in dealing with these issues, including procedure knowledge and declarative knowledge (Act vs. Facts) in the learning process, the Acquisition Model Instruction and the Learning Model Instruction (AMI vs. LMI), simplified versus traditional characters, types of existing transcription systems for learning the sounds of the Chinese language, the relative weight of the four skills, the proper time to introduce writing, and so on. Instead of favoring one particular approach or a certain system, the best way to laying a good foundation is to give the learner a healthy dose that can be further developed according to his/her needs further down the learning path.

How to learn versus what to learn: The most important thing in an ideal program is to develop the learner’s learning skills (p. 62), which is further divided into cultural skills as well as listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The prominence given to cultural skills agrees with the emphasis throughout the *Guide* on culture as an integrated part of language teaching.

Context: By emphasizing the importance of real-life language use as the context (p. 113) for prochievement assessment, for teaching practice, and for the development of various skills, the *Guide* tries to advocate the use of language skills in different communicative modes encountered in our daily life.

Recommendations: A total of 40 recommendations are given in the first two parts of this *Guide*. All of these are very practical and will be of great help to anybody who is serious about teaching or learning CFL. The checklist (pp. 100–105), though not included among the recommendations, in fact provides many good recommendations in the form of questions. If hard pressed for time, a reader could still benefit greatly by simply going over all the recommendations.

4 Comments and concluding remarks

As the author cautions, one should remember that this *Guide* is not a textbook that is ready for use by teachers in the classroom. In other words, it is not a ready-to-eat pizza that can be delivered to your door. What is provided here is some properly prepared dough that contains all the important ingredients and, depending on what you have in your local kitchen, you could use this basic material to make your own pizza, bread, or even steamed bun, if you don’t have an oven.

By focusing on the first two parts of this *Guide*, the author of this short review hopes to draw the attention of all CFL learners, as well as practitioners in our field, to the fundamentals of Basic

Chinese as described, regardless of the language and cultural backgrounds of the learner, be it Japanese, Korean, Arabic, Russian or Slavic.