

Review of “Teaching and Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language. A Pedagogical Grammar”

Title	Teaching and Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language. A Pedagogical Grammar
Author	Janet Zhiqun Xing
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Reviewed by Edward McDonald

Janet Zhiqun Xing has been an active participant in a vigorous debate over Chinese pedagogical grammar which has been taking place over the last decade, mainly in the pages of the “Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association” (JCLTA): e.g. Teng (1997), Liu (1998), Xing (1998), McDonald (1999), Loke (2002), Xing (2003) and Tao (2005). Xing’s 2003 article is indeed entitled “Towards a Pedagogical Grammar of Chinese ...” and her book can thus be seen as the fulfilment of the promise implied in that title. In this context, Xing’s book might be expected not just to provide a practical framework for designing curricula to teach Chinese as a foreign language (FL), but as “the first book written in English that systematically addresses all major aspects involved in teaching and learning Chinese as a foreign language” (back cover) to summarise the state of the art in research on teaching and learning Chinese. Unfortunately neither of these expectations is satisfactorily fulfilled, and the book, I believe, misses the opportunity to sum up this still developing field and point new ways forward.

In her own summary, the overall aim of the book is as follows:

The basic idea is that the communicative approach is the guiding principle and that we need to develop a system that will integrate all major factors relevant to teaching and learning Chinese into everyday practice so that teachers and students will benefit from such work. (p. 27)

In relation to existing research in this area, the author characterises her aims as follows:

This book is designed to help teachers and students of the Chinese language learn the most recent developments in teaching and learning Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language...it discusses the theoretical models developed for Chinese language pedagogy and acquisition, provides theoretical grounds for selecting teaching materials, and proposes applicable methodology for teaching and learning Chinese. (p. 1)

In relation to the practicalities of teaching Chinese, she claims that:

this book may serve as a manual for teaching and learning Chinese as FL at all levels, training potential Chinese language teachers, or designing a Chinese language curriculum. (p. 3)

Both these aims are related to “five identified content areas ... selected because of their unique characteristics and functions in Chinese and the complexity inherent in their teaching and acquisition,” specified as “pronunciation, characters and words, sentences, discourse, and culture” (p. 1). The book as a whole is broken down into “three layers of discussion and illustration” (p. 27): an “overview of the field of teaching and learning Chinese as FL” (Chapter 1); a discussion of the “two major content areas affecting all phases of teaching and learning Chinese”, i.e. “what constitutes a pedagogical grammar of Chinese” (Chapter 2), and “teaching methodology” (Chapter 3); followed by a specification of ways for “teaching and learning different elements of Chinese” (Chapters 4 to 8).

The book is intended to benefit what Xing refers to as “Chinese language practitioners”, defined as “teachers and students of Chinese as FL” (p. 15) who are seen to share many common goals, as Xing explains using a domestic metaphor:

Although the members of these two categories of language practice vary in terms of status/position, attitudes and personality, they engage in activities that are very dependent on goals: to teach or learn communicative skills in the target language. These two members function as if they are a married couple practicing the Chinese language. Both of them have to work hard, learn from each other and cooperate with each other to create a harmonious environment so that teachers become skillful in teaching and students become knowledgeable and competent in communicating in Chinese. (p.15)

This certainly sounds like just the comprehensive and practically-oriented survey the field needs. However, a detailed examination of the book shows up a number of deep-rooted problems. The first is a rather imprecise approach to the use of terms and concepts. In Xing’s earlier article, she quotes the definition of “pedagogical grammar given in Odlin’s 1994 collection on this topic as ‘a practically oriented hybrid’ drawing on work in several fields such as prescriptive grammar, descriptive grammar, psychology, and universal grammar” to which she adds “[p]resumably grammar here embodies syntax, semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis” (2003, p. 41). Xing’s redefinition bleaches Odlin’s cross-disciplinary focus of all significance, restricting its ‘hybrid’ nature to fields within or closely allied to linguistics. In an earlier state of the art paper in JCLTA, which, however, Xing fails to reference in her book, Kit-Ken Loke suggests that the “*what, how and why* a language teacher teaches depends on his/her understanding of the nature of *language, of teaching and of learning,*” and in line with the spirit of Odlin’s definition suggests that such questions need to be referred to the “different conceptual and disciplinary fields [of] Linguistics, Education and Psychology, respectively (Loke, 2002, pp. 66–67, original emphasis). Xing’s book makes little or no contact with these other fields outside linguistics, apart from some anecdotal and ‘commonsense’ mentions.

Furthermore, despite its claimed communicative approach, Xing’s book suffers from the inconsistency also mentioned in Loke’s article in relation to an earlier debate about ‘proficiency’ in Chinese language teaching circles, that “despite the proposed attention to ‘proficiency’, the basic underlying view about language is still predominantly structural, not functional or communicative” (Loke, 2002, p. 66). As Loke further explains:

This decontextualised structural focus implies a pedagogical belief that the mastery of vocabulary and grammatical structures and rules...will automatically enable learners to use them in actual realistic communication, which has been repeatedly proven, in the applied linguistics literature, to be unrealistic. (2002, p. 68)

Although Xing cites a good range of the relevant applied linguistic literature, her actual suggestions for pedagogical grammar are firmly character-, word-, and sentence-based. Moreover, her untheorised acceptance of clear and non-permeable boundaries between the different areas of lin-

guistics cited above is in practice predicated on explanations of individual lexical or grammatical items, often those represented by a single character, and thus fails to deliver on the promise of systematicity her book claims to provide. Regretfully, Xing's book must thus be judged as a missed opportunity.

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