Articles: General

Towards a Communicative Curriculum for Teaching Chinese to Students in Japan

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Abstract: *It is the aim of this research article to discuss and define a communicative approach for teaching Chinese language and culture to university students in Japan. Through examining the characteristics of Chinese-language learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the study analyzes in what aspects Chinese-language teaching should vary for different groups of learners. To achieve the goal of implementing an efficient Chinese-language teaching program for learners with Japanese background, a wider scope with three different categories of Chinese-language learners is investigated: (1) learners with a Chinese language and culture background, (2) those with an English language and culture background, and (3) those with a Japanese language and culture background. Each group of learners requires its own unique curriculum, syllabus, teaching method and learning focus to achieve communicative competence. In addressing the learning needs of Japanese students, the article discusses concepts for classroom and self-learning activities in Chinese language acquisition. The linguistic transparency existing between the Chinese and Japanese languages as well as the common cultural heritage of Japan and China are further taken into account. By incorporating the most recent trends in language teaching theory, this paper intends to provide insights for teaching methodology and syllabus/curriculum development so as to be a reference for educators and administrators in designing foreign language training programs.*

Introduction

This paper offers contributions to both the theory and substance of teaching Chinese. With a close view on current debates in applied linguistics, the specific needs of Japanese university students for learning the Chinese language are examined. Drawing from recent research in the discipline of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), a communicative syllabus for teaching Chinese to Japanese learners is envisaged. To determine a profile of needs for this learner group, the circumstances of different adult learner groups and the importance of learning Chinese for such learner groups are discussed. I further integrated feedback received earlier this year at three international conferences (SITE 2004 in Atlanta, CSSE 2004 in Winnipeg, JALTCALL in Mito, Ibaraki-ken), where I had the privilege to participate with presentations and publications. Judging from the bulk of the available language training material available for the Chinese language, the ideas and insights of language teaching researchers and applied linguists have so far not been sufficiently integrated into the practice of Chinese language teaching (Li, 2002). Generally speaking, language learners' different language and culture backgrounds have to be considered; in particular, the unique situation of Chinese-language learners with Japanese background must be understood, acknowledged and taken into account in teaching.

Since the 1970s (Wilkins, 1981; Munby, 1978; Bell, 1981), syllabus design and content in

Second Language (L2) acquisition have been receiving an increasing amount of attention. There was a movement away from the grammatical and situational syllabus to the notional (or functional, or communicative) syllabus. The notional syllabus is truly functional in its approach to language teaching, with a sociolinguistic orientation. In contrast to situational language teaching, the notional approach rests on a functional view of the nature of language and a cognitive view of language learning. The main characteristic of a notional syllabus is its strongly sociolinguistic orientation (Bell, 1981). More recently, the acquisition of pragmatic abilities within a comprehensive model of communicative competence dominates many methodology discussions (Kasper, 2001; Matsumura, 2003). In recent years, an emphasis on the formal criteria of language in teaching and learning has been emerging in the literature by stressing 'focus on form' in the communicative approach (Basturkmen et al., 2004; Nassaji, 2003; Nassaji & Fotos, 2004).

The roots of the communicative approach to language teaching

In their publications starting in the 1970s at the Council of Europe in Stras-bourg (France), Wilkins (1981) formulated the basic ideas for the communicative syllabus based on the learners' communication needs. As Munby (1978) puts it: *"the area of syllabus design … requires more systematic attention to the communication needs of the learner, especially the derivational relationship of syllabus specification to such needs"* (p.1). The syllabus has to comply with the needs of the learners – a common-sense tenet that applies not only to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses which are Munby's main focus, but also to a Chinese-language program for Japanese learners who plan to work for Japanese companies dealing with China.

While determining the communication needs of language learners in certain social settings requires a pragmatic/sociolinguistic approach, we should not lose sight of the numerous other linguistic theories and didactic approaches that have produced a large amount of theoretical and practical literature on teaching/learning a foreign language.

Theories and methods for language teaching have developed since the behaviourist approach (Skinner, 1957). Within our sociolinguistic orientation towards the learners' communication needs, we should also be aware of the other schools of linguistic and didactic theory, and we should be eclectic and pragmatic whenever this seems necessary (Gethin & Gunnemark, 1996).

The importance of needs analysis becomes apparent through Savignon's (1990) emphasis on a functionalist view of the learners' competence based on their communicative needs: "Learner communicative needs provide a framework for elaborating program goals in terms of functional competence" (p. 210).

Wilkins (1981), one of the founders of the communicative approach to language teaching, has shown that for determining the needs of language learners we have to focus our attention on a sociolinguistic approach: "Drawing heavily on sociolinguistics, it (i.e., needs analysis) provides a means of making extremely detailed descriptive statements about the language needs of the learners" (p. 95).

This paper stresses learner-group-specific needs, and their importance, for implementing a communicative pedagogy. We determine the needs of Japanese students who expect to communicate within an environment with different history, politics or culture. Munby (1978) postulates that before deciding what to teach the learners, we must know their requirements in terms of communicative mode and activities, and the relationship between the learners and their eventual interlocutors. That is to say, the specification of communication requirements or needs must happen prior to the selection of speech functions or communicative acts to be taught. By

drawing up a profile of communication needs one can more validly specify the particular skills and linguistic forms to be taught.

The Chinese language

With China having joined the WTO, the Chinese language is gaining importance internationally. It has been gradually assuming the role of *lingua franca* in Asia - Mainland China, Taiwan and Singapore, and large parts of Southeast Asia. According to a report in the Japan Times (2004), at Japanese universities and schools, Mandarin has overtaken French and German to become the most popular language after English. Ninety percent of China's population is Han Chinese, and the standard language in both China and Taiwan is Modern Standard Chinese (MSC), in Chinese referred to as 'Putonghua' (Common Language). While the term 'MSC' has been accepted widely in Western linguistics, Modern Standard Chinese is still often referred to as 'Mandarin' which is a misnomer, translated directly from the Chinese term 'guanhua', originally meaning the official language of old Imperial China. In Bolton and Kwok (1991) we read that in China *"… in its spoken form, 'Putonghua' is a Lin-gua Franca between speakers of the various languages and dialects intra-nationally"* (p. 25).

In the Republic of Singapore, the Chinese population has an overall majority of about 76%. Although within Singapore "English is the dominant language of education, government law and commerce, and virtually all schools use English as the medium of instruction, and English also functions as a 'lingua franca' between the different ethnic groups in the society" (Bolton & Kwok, 1991, p. 38). It should further be noted that the 'Lingua Franca' status of English only applies to Singapore intranationally; 'inter-nationally' within Asia, it is MSC that occupies the *lingua franca* position: travelers who know MSC can communicate in most Asian countries because in all these countries the Chinese population, even if it occupies a minority position (Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, etc.), plays a major part in business and politics. The Chinese characters being the basis of the Japanese writing system, a Japanese traveler can read most of the signs in China, and even communicate with the Chinese through "written conversation" (Chinese "bitan", Japanese "hitsudan").

The Chinese written language

People from Taiwan and Hong Kong are more familiar with traditional characters and prefer to use these traditional characters in the Chinese language teaching. Scholars from Taiwan and Hong Kong can use the traditional full characters in their publications, and in the 1980s and even 1990s, the use of simplified characters in the classroom and public examinations was discouraged and sometimes forbidden in these two communities (Zhang, 1997).

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese characters (*Hànzì* 汉字) were simplified under the 'Chinese Character Simplification Scheme', by reducing as far as possible the number of strokes. In the 1950's approx. 2,000 Chinese characters that were considered to contain too many strokes, be too difficult to learn and thus an obstacle for literacy and education, were simplified. The Simplified characters (*jiǎn-tǐzì* 简体字, Japanese *kantaiji*) are taught in schools in the PRC, used in publications in the PRC, Singapore, and many overseas Chinese newspapers, and are recognized by the United Nations as the official Chinese script.

The new simplified characters are composed of fewer strokes than traditional characters. Many of the newly introduced simplified characters were not new to China, but had already been

used at some time in the past by writers and calligraphers; the script reform in the new China was Chinese character simplification and consolidation at the same time. As a consequence of this reform, the simplified writing system is today's standard in the PRC, whereas in Taiwan and most overseas Chinese communities the traditional script is being used. In Japan, a mixture of simplified and traditional characters is in use. The character simplification contributes to easy legibility but – according to critics of the script reform – diminishes the aesthetics of written Chinese.

Characteristics of three different learner groups

Chinese native speakers learning Chinese. Children in China can already speak their native language when they enter school, but cannot read or write. They already have the advantage of speech communication. In teaching this group, writing Chinese characters is of primary importance. For example, when teaching the Chinese-character form of the sentence *Wǒ shì Zhōngguórén* ("I am Chinese"), the teacher has to make the pupils recognize, memorize, and write the characters 我是中国人, and pronunciation is not a concern.

A Chinese native speaker goes to school mainly to learn the written form of the Chinese language; traditionally, the written form of Chinese is given priority over the spoken language. Further, traditional Chinese education tends to regard the written ideographs as the primary means of communication, rather than speech. According to Le Page (1991), "…we have a very highly focused ancient written code, the focusing agency in recent centuries having been a Mandarin class of scholaradministrators who were recruited through written examinations - their pronunciation was not tested" (p. 122-123). Therefore, traditional linguistic studies in China only emphasized written Chinese as a measure of knowledge.

Learners with an English-language background. This group *a priori* cannot communicate in spoken and written Chinese. Since in their case there is no transparency between their mother tongue and the target language, this group of learners needs to learn both spoken and written Chinese from the ground up. For example, when teaching the sentence *Wǒ shì Jiānádàrén* 我是加拿大人 "I am Canadian" to learners in this group, they have to learn both the pronunciation and the Chinese characters from scratch. The difficulty of the learning task is compounded by the fact that there is no obvious relation between the written and spoken form of the words, as it exists in phonetically written languages. The written Chinese language is not just a transcription of its spoken form, but a speech-unrelated graphic-encoded communication system of characters. This relation between speech and script makes Chinese a difficult language to learn even for many Chinese native speakers.

A westerner who is learning Chinese in its spoken and written forms at the same time is therefore learning two 'unrelated' forms of the Chinese language. Only after a long-term effort of the student a certain transparency between spoken and written Chinese, and a re-enforcement (or feedback) between the different language skills, takes effect. This peculiar trait of the Chinese language must be reflected in a Chinese language course for native speakers of a European language. The degree of linguistic transparency between the mother language of the learner and the foreign language being learned indicates what degree of difficulty the target language presents to the learner (Gethin & Gunnemark, 1996). As Chinese is so different in structure, vocabulary, and phonetics from Western languages, there is no transparency at all for the English speaker who is learning Chinese, as there would be - for example - for the English speaker who is learning

French or German.

An important tool for teaching Chinese pronunciation is the Roman transcription standard *Hànyǔ pīnyīn* 汉语拼音, which is a phonetic transcription of MSC. *Hànyǔ pīnyīn* was introduced in China on a large scale in 1958 as part of China's Modernization Program, and has been taught since then in China's elementary schools starting from first grade. Before Chinese first-graders learn to read Chinese characters, they are taught the *Hànyǔ pīnyīn* version of the words. *Hànyǔ pīnyīn* is mainly used in the domain of education for language teaching, in dictionaries, for signs, on the packaging of manufactured goods, in writing systems for minority languages, and as the international standard for Chinese place names, and in libraries around the world.

Learners with Japanese background. Our focus is on this learner group. For defining the learning needs of this group, Chinese/Japanese language transparency as described in detail by Zhang (2004a) must be carefully taken into consideration. Japanese speakers and Chinese speakers can read quite a lot of each other's writing, since both Japanese and Chinese use almost the same characters. The writing system of Japanese is based on Chinese characters. Further, a large proportion of Japanese vocabulary (an estimated 50%) can be accounted for as lexical loans from Chinese (Bolton & Kwok, 1991). Teaching Chinese to this learner group, we can anticipate transfers, or cross-linguistic influence, from Japanese. Such transfers can be positive as well as negative: teachers and students can capitalize on the similarities between the two languages (Benson, 2002). Teaching materials can be used that illustrate the transparency, including pitfalls like potential transfer errors.

When I teach Japanese students the sentence *Wǒ shì Rìběnrén* 我是日本人 "I am Japanese", they basically already know the Chinese characters and can guess the meaning by looking at the characters, but they cannot read the characters with their Chinese pronunciation. Thus, when speaking to my class of Japanese students in Chinese, I often have to explain or translate even simple messages in Japanese to make them understand. For example, when I repeatedly said: *Wǒ qù Jiānádà. Wǒ qù shí tiān.* "I am going to Canada. I will be staying there for ten days", the students had difficulty understanding me. So, while saying it again, I wrote 我去加拿大. 我去十天. on the blackboard. Before I could finish writing the two sentences, the students had already understood and had to laugh at their difficulty in understanding such a simple utterance. The incident illustrates the importance of emphasizing the spoken form of Chinese - a major challenge for Japanese students.

For the teaching of Chinese to Japanese speakers, Benson's (2002) principles of transfer and cross-linguistic influence are relevant points of reference. However, transfer between Chinese and Japanese on the basis of the transparency between the two languages is a double-edged sword, both in respect to semantic errors (e.g., shifts in meaning of adopted *Hànzì* vocabulary), and in respect to learning attitudes of students: the transparency between Chinese and Japanese is restricted to the written form of the two languages. The frequently observed neglect of spoken Chinese is due to the Japanese learners' high degree of understanding of written Chinese text: why learn the Mandarin pronunciation of a Chinese word which is understandable in its written form? This attitude explains why Chinese language learners of Japanese background prefer writing Chinese over speaking, and perform a lot better in written than in spoken Chinese.

Syllabus and curriculum design

SLA theory, which provides the guiding concepts for syllabus and curriculum design, has made

tremendous progress in recent years and has undergone major shifts of focus. Most of the new concepts developed within general SLA directly apply to the teaching of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL).

Pragmatic ability. Within the debates on the communicative approach to language teaching, an increasing body of research examines the development of L2 learners' pragmatic ability. Among the variety of theoretical perspectives in the research of interlanguage pragmatics, Kasper (2001) analyzes four main approaches:

- Within a comprehensive model of communicative competence, pragmatics is viewed either as an autonomous component or in its interdependence and interaction with grammatical ability;
- Pragmatic language learning is mainly information processing, involving attention, awareness, input and metapragmatic knowledge;
- The sociocultural perspective of pragmatic learning, involving assisted performance in both teacher-student and peer interaction;
- Language socialization: cultural and pragmatic knowledge are jointly acquired through learners' participation in recurring social activities.

The Japanese SLA researcher Matsumura (2003) in his recent empirical study points out the complex relationship that exists between pragmatic development, L2 proficiency and L2 exposure. His findings show that pragmatic abilities depend less on proficiency than on exposure.

Focus on form – incidental or planned? Focus on form is a feature of communicative language teaching (CLT), which is defined as teaching oriented primarily towards exchanging meaning or messages. Focus on form occurs as incidental time-outs taken by students and teachers to deal with issues of linguistic form during communicative lessons (Basturkmen et al., 2004). One of the main points of discussion is when it is legitimate to take time out from a communicative activity to focus on issues of form. The main idea is that CLT, although meaning-centred, need not preclude attention to form if this takes place in the context of performing a communicative task. Ellis (2001) points out that there are two types of focus on form: planned and incidental. In planned focus on form, the teacher pre-selects a form for attention and designs a focused communicative task that will provide opportunities for its use. This is the approach we observe in most grammar-based textbooks and teaching materials. In incidental focus on form, the teacher makes no attempt to predetermine on which form issue to concentrate; rather, the focus on form arises naturally out of the performance of a communicative task. This approach happens when teaching with authentic language material. Recent research has documented the fact that incidental focus on form occurs frequently in CLT, either as 'reactive focus on form' (the teacher's response to errors made by students), or as 'pre-emptive focus on form' (the teacher's explanation of a linguistic item when no error has occurred in class).

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). This stands for an approach to language teaching that claims to achieve excellence in learner performance through enhancing teacher-learner congruence (Millrood, 2004). Hardingham (1998) sees NLP as one of the resources to enhance effectiveness of language instruction. Thornbury (2001) believes that NLP helps teachers and students achieve excellence of performance in language teaching and learning, improve classroom communication, optimize learner attitudes and motivation, raise self-esteem, facilitate personal growth in students, and even change their attitude to life. NLP in teacher discourse is defined as addressing the

learners' cognitive-emotional domain (the 'neuro' component) through verbal interaction with the learner (the 'linguistic' component), resulting in perfect harmony in teachers' and learners' classroom interaction. Classroom procedures develop smoothly and naturally with teacher and learners being on the same 'wavelength'. The most recently defined inventory of NLP techniques (Millrood, 2004) includes establishing a rapport between the teacher and learners, modeling the learner (offering strategies for better results), creating a learner filter (monitoring correct/incorrect knowledge), pacing with the learner, leading the learner (introducing a cognitive challenge), elicitation with the learner (guiding the learner to an output), calibration of the learners (recognizing their individual differences), re-framing the approach (e.g., stopping unproductive teaching strategies), and reinforcing learner achievement by emphasizing success (called 'collapsing an anchor'). In general terms, the NLP approach is characterized by the teacher encouraging the learner and thus building the learner's ego and motivation.

Language production and comprehensible output. As FL teachers, we all know – or have said at some point – words of wisdom like 'you have to use the language if you want to master it'. Producing the target language, or output, has long been considered as forming an important part of language learning (Izumi, 2003). The output hypothesis claims that when learners experience communication difficulties, the circumstances force them to make their output more precise, coherent, and appropriate, and this process is said to contribute to language learning. In other words, the output requirement presents learners with unique opportunities to deploy their cognitive resources. Output can contribute to language learning by strengthening the learner's interlanguage (IL) knowledge base that may still be only weakly established, and enhance automatisms in language use. Output triggers chains of psycholinguistic processes that are conducive to language learning. It may facilitate grammar acquisition, but the beneficial influence of output may be restricted by the level of the learners' proficiency. Thus, lower proficiency learners who are struggling with the production of one-word utterances may not be able to engage much of grammatical encoding during production because their cognitive effort may be spent primarily on the retrieval of lexical items (Bygate, 1999). Therefore, forcing the learner to produce output too early in the language learning program may not be conducive to language learning.

Task-Based Interaction (TBI). A task-based approach to learning a language can benefit learners in numerous ways (Murphy, 2003). Such tasks can contribute to enhancing learners' language accuracy, fluency, and they can even facilitate vocabulary acquisition (Newton, 2001). In a task-based approach to learning, learners will often meet new vocabulary 'in passing' as they pursue communicative goals. The teacher can turn such incidental encounters with new vocabulary to the learner's advantage through the introduction of cooperative options for exposing learners to new words during TBI. Such strategies include guessing with the use of context cues, negotiating meaning with others, and having to attend to new words under communicative pressure. This approach, however, necessitates careful management by the teacher to prevent the struggle with new words overtaking other important goals such as fluency or content-understanding. In his early study on TBI, Breen (1987) suggests a checklist of four points for designing language communication tasks:

- The objective of the task, e.g., is it to focus learners' attention on accuracy?
- The content of the task, e.g., does it draw on familiar or unfamiliar information?
- How the task is to be carried out, e.g., will learners engage in planning before the task?
- In what situation the task is to be carried out, e.g., will the task be monologic or dialogic?

The pre-planning of TBI should involve the learners, which results in a more fruitful implementation (Mori, 2002). TBI offers a maximization of opportunities for the language learner to engage in close-to-real-life interaction and facilitate purposeful language use.

Constructivism: the influence of education on SLA. Constructivism has emerged in recent years as a main paradigm in education and is just beginning to have an impact on language pedagogy (Kaufman, 2004). Constructivism as an approach to learning emphasizes cognitive development and individual construction of knowledge, as well as social construction of knowledge, and is a major concept in the research on literacy. Learning according to constructivism is a developmental process that involves change, self-generation, and construction, each building on prior learning experiences. Learning occurs through construction of new understandings through reading, exploration, and experience. This involves the three processes of *assimilation, accommodation,* and *equilibrium*. In this learning theory, new experiences are *assimilated* and integrated through *accommodation*. The outcome of these processes is *equilibrium* - the achievement of new understandings, coherence, and cognitive stability. Constructivism is increasingly influencing language pedagogy, and has led to Content-Based Language Learning (CBLL), thus changing the focus of language teaching from teaching a language in isolation to its integration into disciplinary content.

Language Socialization (LS). The main concept of this approach is that language originates in social interaction and is shaped by cultural and sociopolitical processes (Watson-Gegeo, 2004). Insights from cognitive science research and sociology continue to change the understanding of language teaching and learning as well as SLA research in general. LS has emerged during the past decade as a strong component in the discipline, through the realization that language learning and enculturation are part of the same process. The basic premises of LS are that linguistic and cultural knowledge are constructed through each other and that there is no context-free language learning because all communicative contexts involve social, cultural, and political dimensions.

Culture teaching and learning. There is a growing body of literature on training and preparing students for doing international business in order to minimize linguistic barriers and cross-cultural differences and misunderstandings. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language learning and competence in language use are determined not only by the ability to use language with grammatical accuracy, but also to use language appropriately in particular contexts (Tseng, 2002). Acquiring true language competence includes cultural learning. Students with high TOEFL scores often have communication difficulties when exposed to a cultural context. In the teaching of languages, the cultural dimension of communication must be considered. We should not generalize culture as a monolithic structure (Guest, 2002), but be aware of each student as an individual. The overall consensus is that language and culture are intertwined, but it seems difficult to teach culture along with language. Scholars are still searching for a more efficient method to deal with culture issues in second language acquisition.

Summing up, in most of the Chinese teaching materials that are available, we observe a lack of background in Language Teaching Research, and Foreign Language Didactics (Li, 2002). Through a needs analysis based approach in designing a communicative language curriculum, and incorporation of leading-edge theory and methodology as introduced earlier in this article, we can avoid an unfocused, diffuse pragmatism in teaching Chinese as a second language. In my opinion, a high level of theory and methodology awareness in combination with the use of modern

instructional technology and educational media (Zhang, 2004b) are the best guarantee for success in Chinese language teaching and learning.

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