
Review Essays

Some Thoughts on Recent L2 Chinese Textbooks

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Textbooks are obviously extremely important for both teaching and learning. What we teach, how we teach, and failure or success of teaching and learning, to a certain extent, are all dependent on the textbooks we choose. This analysis is based on a close look at a dozen L2 Chinese textbooks used recently, with a comparison to a few classic L2 Chinese textbooks published in Mainland China. High-quality intermediate and advanced textbooks are the key to changing the situations where students are back and forth at the same level and where students still cannot communicate in Chinese after a few years' learning. The urgent task of L2 Chinese textbook compilation in Japan is to improve the quality in the areas of pertinence, qualitative scope, and quantification standards.

Introduction

Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL) is a relatively new field with a half-century history, and it has only developed quickly over the past two decades or so. In 2002, there were more than 2,100 universities from 85 countries offering Chinese, and about 25 million people were studying Chinese outside China, (Dong, 2002). In Japan there are nearly 2 million people studying Chinese; more than 500 universities offering Chinese, 85 of them with Chinese majors, and more than 300,000 Japanese participating in various Chinese competence tests. In 2003 around 78,000 foreigners studied Chinese in China, among them, about 13,000 were Japanese (Yi, 2004).

Along with the increasing number of foreigners learning Chinese, there has been a dramatic development of L2 Chinese textbooks as well. In Mainland China, 600 – 700 Chinese textbooks were brought into print between the late 70's and early 90's, with the quantity of such publications peaking in the early 1990s. Since the 1950s, publishers of L2 Chinese textbooks have increased from one or two to 43 in 2001. In Japan, there are many publishers of Chinese textbooks, such as Hakuteisha, Asahipress, Koseikan, Hakusuisha, Kohbun, Kinsei-do, etc. There are 670 items under the title of CHINESE published in Japan between 2000 and 2004 that in September 2004 could be bought at www.toho-shoten.co.jp/. Among them, about 500 are textbooks. Others are periodicals, dictionaries, monographs, and so on.

Compared to decades ago, L2 Chinese educators have plenty to choose from when they select textbooks. However, few of them are satisfactory to users both inside and outside China.

I. Criticisms from Foreign L2 Chinese Educators

The criticisms from foreign L2 Chinese educators can be grouped into the following four aspects:

1. lack of systematic textbooks that include listening, speaking, reading, and writing;
2. the texts are boring, often too difficult, and not culture-oriented;
3. transition from a phonetic writing system (*Pinyin*) to the Chinese ideogram is too quick;
and
4. conversation materials are not practical.

Due to the short history of L2 Chinese teaching, most of its textbooks are still under the influence of L1 Chinese textbooks. The L2 Chinese learners are often not interested in political papers used in L1 Chinese textbooks, or they find it difficult to cope with purely Chinese literary texts. For the L1 Chinese learners, they have been exposed to *Pinyin* and daily conversation since they were born. Thus, pronunciation and conversation take small proportion in the L1 Chinese curriculum. Many L2 Chinese textbooks only have a few pages with phonetic drills and ignore the daily conversation that foreign beginners need the most. Lots of unpractical materials were used in conversation texts to make use of grammar points. The results are that students can repeat after the teacher in classroom but cannot communicate in a daily situation outside the classroom. It is the same case with cultural content. The common knowledge of Chinese culture for L1 Chinese learners is what L2 Chinese learners need but is often ignored in many L2 textbooks. In terms of systematic textbooks, there are quite a few sets of them now in Mainland China, for example, those compiled by Beijing Language University and Beijing University. They are very comprehensive and of good quality. However, the language environments are usually based in China, and most of them are aimed at English speakers. As many authors of L2 Chinese textbooks from Mainland China do not have experience of living abroad, it is hard for them to find the relevant materials that foreign learners are familiar with or interested in. Recently, many cooperative projects have been conducted to compile systematic textbooks for certain areas or certain countries. For example, a set of textbooks for Chinese majors at Vietnamese universities has been published recently through the Sino-Vietnamese cooperative project, and “it is a great thing to Vietnamese teachers and students of Chinese” (Deng, 2004).

II. Criticisms from L2 Chinese Experts in China

Many experts in China are satisfied with the quantity of the L2 Chinese textbooks but not the quality of them. They think that few of these textbooks can pass the experts’ examination (Wang, 2000), and most of them are not satisfying (Wu, 1998, as cited in Li, 2002). L2 Chinese textbook-compiling lacks methodology, the style and concepts are out of date, and there is too much literary material. In short, the situation of L2 Chinese textbooks is only at a “subsistence level”, and far away from “well-off” (Li, 2002).

III. Thoughts on L2 Chinese Textbooks Published in Japan

In Japan, L2 Chinese textbooks are written by either Chinese or Japanese, or in many cases, co-authored with Chinese and Japanese. In the third case, the textbook can combine semantics, language usage, and linguistic environment that Japanese are familiar with. For example, among 118 elementary Chinese textbooks published by Hakuteisha, 36 of them were written by Chinese, 26 by Japanese, and 55 of them are co-authored (Shi, 2004). The following is the induction of recently published Chinese textbooks in Japan by Shi Rujie (2004):

1. they are mostly the textbooks for non-majors used for one year;
2. they are short in length with 100 pages or less;
3. texts are short; one page at elementary level and one to two pages at intermediate level;
4. texts and example sentences are usually provided with Pinyin;
5. little or no explanation of grammar; sometimes they only have example sentences;
6. limited vocabulary: usually around 500;
7. no instruction on writing Chinese characters, and no comparison of Chinese and Japanese Kanji;
8. the number of exercise varies from less than 10 for each lesson to a whole exercise book;
9. most textbooks include tapes or CDs;
10. usually provide the translation of the texts and answers to the exercises;
11. expensive.

Generalization is different from examination. We will not have a clear idea of the pros and cons of a textbook until we have used it. We choose a textbook based on our needs, our preferences, and sometimes on the first impression. We may also choose a textbook just because of convenience, for example, a certain textbook was on a teacher's desk from the publisher, or a textbook that was used before. Textbooks are extremely important for teaching and learning, as is textbook evaluation, choosing, and compilation. McGrath (2002) summarizes the following learner factors that need to be considered in teaching material draws:

1. age range
2. proficiency level in the target language
3. first language
4. academic and educational level
5. socio-cultural background
6. occupation
7. reasons for studying the target language
8. attitudes to learning
9. previous language-learning experience
10. language-learning aptitude
11. general expectations
12. specific wants
13. preferred learning styles
14. sex distribution
15. interests

In the same book, McGrath also listed many criteria for textbook evaluation, such as:

1. appropriate sequencing of grammatical patterns
2. sentence length reasonable for students of that level
3. vocabulary load reasonable
4. gives practice in controlled composition in the early stages
5. enough communicative activities
6. balance of language skills
7. plenty of authentic language

The following are some of the author's thoughts on a dozen L2 Chinese textbooks used recently that were published in Japan. It can be considered as a post-use evaluation in the process of an armchair evaluation with focus on context analysis. There are three main criteria: pertinence, qualitative scope, and quantification standards.

Pertinence

Pertinence is one of the main criteria of textbook compilation. A pertinent textbook has to take several factors into consideration, such as learners' background (age, nationality, native language and culture, etc.), goals of the program, and time limit of the curriculum.

Learners' Background

Language acquisition cannot be separated from cultural learning, but its connection must be at the level of learners' background knowledge. Most of the textbooks in this research use materials from a Chinese language environment, such as travelling in China, recent phenomenon in Chinese society, and quotations from Chinese newspapers. However, some of the materials are not suitable for L2 Chinese students. The following two paragraphs are from one of the reading textbooks used last year:

姚雪垠同志被错划为“极右派”的时候，他将自己丰富的人生感慨，满腔的激昂悲愤和对社会、对历史高尚的使命和责任感，灌注在《李自成》这部具有划时代意义的长篇历史小说创作之中。

普通老百姓对于政府的工作，理应本着“知无不言，言无不尽”的原则，多提批评意见和合理化建议，但如果言者谆谆，没有人听，或者听者一个耳朵进一个耳朵出，恐怕久而久之就没有人再仗义执言了。

The contents of the two quotations above are based on a specific social background, and many vocabulary words are too political and literary and have no practical meaning. They are not suitable for low-level L2 Chinese learners. In the same textbook, each lesson has 6-18 such quotations with little explanation of some words (a dozen or less). The whole textbook did not have any practical exercises. The only way that teachers can use this textbook is to spend most of their time providing students with background knowledge in Japanese. Thus, it loses its value as an L2 Chinese textbook.

Goals of the Program

Each L2 Chinese textbook should have a target. Is it for an academic or non-academic pursuit? Is it for major or non-major students? If it is for majors, is it for freshmen, sophomores, juniors or seniors? A textbook should have a clear explanation to these questions. Unfortunately, most of the textbooks in this research do not have a clear statement for users. They only categorize themselves as being at the elementary or intermediate levels.

Each textbook sets a frame for the goals that educators and learners will reach when they

finish the book, even if it does not have such an explanation literally. We chose an elementary-level book of fifty-four pages as a freshmen's textbook and an intermediate-level book of seventy-nine pages as a sophomores' textbook. At the end of the semester, we made final examinations based on the two textbooks. The difficulty levels of the two final exams were very close. By coincidence, or as a result, in an external test, the average score of sophomores was below that of the freshmen in that semester. In another case, we chose an intermediate-level book as the juniors' textbook. It has 20 lessons total. Each lesson has about 500 characters. Obviously it is meant to be used for an entire academic year, but we could only finish seven lessons in two semesters. Although the class only went over three and a half lessons each semester, one of the best students from this class thought that textbook was too difficult.

Time Limit of Curriculum

The length of textbooks in Japan is based on two semesters per school year with 90-100 minutes for each class and 13-14 weeks per semester. Thus, the L2 Chinese textbooks we use were designed with this time frame in mind. They usually have 50-100 pages with 12-20 lessons, but because they do not have a clear target, it is difficult for teachers to choose an appropriate one to fit their students' level, pace, and needs. Although some textbooks are labelled at the same level, say elementary, they are very different in their level of difficulty. The length of a textbook is also relative, depending on whether it is used for major or non-major students. For example, one textbook we used has only 12 short lessons with only six pages of phonetic spelling and about 300 vocabulary words. It may be enough for non-major students to use for two semesters, but certainly not substantial enough for Chinese majors. Yet we used it for Chinese majors for two semesters. The opposite example is the same book mentioned above, where we could only cover 35% of the materials in the book in the whole academic year.

Qualitative Scope

The qualitative scope of the textbook was defined by linguistic theories, format of language materials, guidelines of compilation, and linguistic and cultural comparison.

Structure, function, situation, and culture are the main elements dividing various linguistic theories that influence L2 Chinese textbook compiling. Before the 1980s, L2 Chinese textbooks in Mainland China were mainly based on structuralism in the form of sentence drills. Since the early 1980s, new ideas of textbook writing combined structure, situation, and function. *Modern Chinese Textbook*, written by Beijing Language Institute (1988), was the combination of structure, situation, and function, with a reading and writing section focusing on structure, a speaking section focusing on function, and a listening section focusing on situation. Although each section focuses on one element, it also gave attention to the other two elements. In 1995, a new principle of L2 Chinese textbook compilation was put forward, which added culture as a new element (Cheng, 2001).

We used *Practical Chinese Composition* as the freshman writing textbook. In this book, each lesson covers two pages with three parts: 3-6 example sentences, 3-6 grammar points, and 12 Japanese sentences with new grammatical phenomenon and much new vocabulary that are to be translated into Chinese. This book seems like a product of structuralism, but it does not provide sentence drills to reinforce the grammatical structure.

The format of language materials can be divided into three groups: sentences, dialogues, and

articles. The three formats can be used for teaching different language skills. Sentences can be used for training beginners in all language skills. Dialogue is most suitable for speaking practice. Some comprehensive textbooks use dialogue as the format of text, which is all right as long as they contain necessary sentences to explain the grammar points and add various forms of articles as supplementary text. There are different types of articles such as political papers, literary articles, news reports, and daily-life stories. At the elementary level, daily-life stories and simple literary articles are more appropriate. Simple news reports can be introduced at the intermediate level. Difficult literary articles and political papers should not be the main text for foreign students who have studied Chinese only for a few years. Among the L2 Chinese textbooks in Japan, dialogue is more popular than the other two formats. We used *Hajimeite Narau Chugokugo* and *Chugokugo Saranalu Yibo* as reading and writing textbooks, but they both have the format of dialogue as texts. They could not fulfill the task without supplementing relevant materials.

The guidelines of compilation in this article comprise the core part of each lesson and the whole book. They can be text, grammar, or vocabulary. Which one of them should be the core of a textbook depends on both the specific target language skill and students' level of that target language skill. Usually, listening and speaking should be centred with text, and reading and writing with grammar, but text is a necessity at any section and at any level. The important thing is to choose the appropriate type of text for a specific purpose. While grammar should be the focus of teaching during the elementary period, vocabulary should be emphasized at the intermediate level. However, there should at least be a new word list for each lesson for beginners, preferably with some exercises to enhance students' mastery of these vocabulary words. Focusing more on vocabulary at the intermediate level is extremely critical to raise learners' target language skills. Without a substantial storage of vocabulary in mind, the language skills acquired will not last and will eventually fade away. Here we are not talking about having a list of vocabulary at the end of each lesson or at the end of the book. We are talking about enough practical vocabulary, the lexical category of a word, and the repetition of common terms and phrases.

L2 Chinese textbooks for Japanese learners should include the newest research in comparative studies of Chinese and Japanese, as well as on Sino-Japanese cultures. Linguistic and cultural comparison can be used in the areas of phonetics, semantics, and language usage. This will be helpful in training some difficult *Pinyin*, different meanings of Chinese and Japanese kanji, and certain expressions that cannot be understood from words themselves. Some experts suggest that the order of *Pinyin* should be based on students' native language, so as teaching focuses (Cheng, 2001). In this case, students learn those *Pinyin* with similar pronunciation to their native language first. Without much time and effort, students can learn the first *Pinyin* with confidence and can have the foundation of further learning. Thus, more time can be used on the difficult ones. This is the way to enhance the efficiency of phonics learning. For example, the arrangement of *Pinyin* in *Standard Chinese Textbook* (Beijing University, 1998) is based on Sino-English linguistic comparison and is different from the traditional order of most L2 Chinese textbooks, including all those we used or we are using. In terms of language usage and language environment, cultural comparison can enable students to understand those out-of-line meanings of the target language, of which they can never learn among words and between lines.

Quantification Standards

Quantification standards of a textbook, in another word, is the proportion of:

1. different components of the target language such as phonetic *Pinyin*, vocabulary, and grammar;
2. different sections of lessons such as text, grammar explanation, and exercises; and
3. different types of information such as linguistic or social and cultural messages.

Conversational Chinese 301 (CC301) is one of the best-selling L2 Chinese textbooks by Beijing Language University, which is the only university in Mainland China that only accepts foreign students who are interested in learning Chinese language and culture. Experts spent ten years on compiling this textbook, which was then examined by thousands of users for another ten years or so. It was revised again before its reprint in 2000. The following analysis is based on the comparison of this classic L2 Chinese textbook and recently used textbooks published in Japan.

Phonetic/Pronunciation

CC301 is 274 pages in length with 40 lessons and 800 or so words and phrases. Although it finishes introducing the phonetic *Pinyin* at lesson three, pronunciation drills pass through the whole book including lesson 40. The book provides sufficient materials for students to have a solid foundation in their pronunciation. The phonetic drills include discrimination of sounds and tones, change of tones, frequently used syllables, and conversations. There is a part of phonetics at the beginning of most elementary L2 Chinese textbooks in Japan, but it only covers 6 – 15 pages in those books we used recently. Besides this, most books do not have specific phonetic drills afterwards. The results of this are either that teachers have to continue working with students on their pronunciation when they are juniors or seniors or that some students' pronunciation can never be improved.

Grammar Points

CC301 covers about 100 grammar points. Each of its 40 lessons focuses on two to three points. Many L2 Chinese textbooks chose grammar points based on *Standards of Chinese Competence and Grammar Levels* (1986), from 80 to 170 or so. But the teaching content of some grammar points can be more than three or four times higher than others'. According to the survey conducted at Beijing University, most foreign students prefer less grammar points covered in each lesson. A professor at Beijing Language University suggested two grammar points for each lesson (Lv, 2002). She also suggested the following strategies to adjust the quantification of grammar points:

1. from easy to difficult;
2. simplification over complication;
3. alternate with difficulty and easiness;
4. break up the whole into parts;
5. concentration after disperses; and
6. learning new accompanied with reviewing old.

Chinese Training and Training is an elementary textbook we used for freshmen. The book has 21 lessons total. It was designed for two semesters' usage, but because it covers too many grammar points in each lesson, it is extremely difficult for teachers to teach and for students to

learn. One of the lessons introduced all formats of verbs including 'S+V', 'S+V+O', 'S+V+O+O', 'S+V+V+O', and five other grammar points. Another lesson covers 11 modal verbs and an extra grammar point. This book was considered as one of the students' least favorite textbooks.

Vocabulary

There are two issues involved in choosing vocabulary: which items and how many. We ought to select the simplest and most commonly used words including new ones like 'Internet', 'e-mail' and 'cell phone'. But how much vocabulary should we choose for each level and for the whole program?

There are about 56,000 Chinese characters collected in *Grant Chinese Dictionary* (1986), but only 3,000 are most commonly used. Approximately 1,000 words need to be introduced to Chinese majors each year. CC301 mentioned above can be used for a comprehensive Chinese course for one semester. In such a comprehensive course, students meet once everyday for 90 – 100 minutes each time. The book covers about 800 characters. If students learn 450 characters plus repetition and reviewing those introduced before each semester for the following five semesters, they will have 3,000 common words by the end of the third year. This should not be difficult if all the textbooks can fulfill the vocabulary quantification. Among the five elementary-level textbooks used or in use, the range of the vocabulary is between 300 and 600. They are all used for two semesters. Thus, students learn 150 – 300 words each semester. Although students use all of the five textbooks, the total number of the vocabulary in the five books is still less than CC301. Because they are at the same level, a large proportion of the vocabulary is repetitions.

One of the L2 Chinese textbook compiling rules is that at the elementary level, grammar is the guideline of a textbook, whereas at the intermediate level, textbooks should put more weight on lexicology. However, among the five intermediate-level textbooks we used, two of them have about 500 words listed at the end of the book, but 80% of the 500 words in one book are the repetitions of elementary words. Another textbook with 500 words was used for four semesters. The quantification of the other three intermediate textbooks are as follows: 1) 449 words total with at least 50% of them being repetitions; 2) 399 words with about 50% of them being repetitions; and 3) 339 words with mostly new ones. Although repetition of the common words is an important way of maintaining the storage of vocabulary, introducing new words is the necessary step towards the sufficient quantification of vocabulary.

Words are different from characters. One Chinese word can have from one to four characters. Some new words include a few new characters each, but some new words contain no new characters at all, so the average increase of new characters from each word is approximately one or so. The number of words is not equal to the number of characters, but they are close enough to be used for estimation.

Professor Yang Jizhou is the author of another widely used L2 Chinese textbook *Chinese Course* published by Beijing Language University. According to him, choosing the appropriate and right amount of vocabulary for each lesson is the most time consuming part of the whole compilation. A logical and practical L2 Chinese textbook has to meet the following three requirements in arrangement of vocabulary: 1) ensure the repetition of common words; 2) consistent amount of vocabulary for each lesson; and 3) most are common words (Yang, 2003).

Exercises

The function of exercises is to reinforce what has been taught. Exercises help students to review and enhance the skill they learned from each course, and they also provide a broader foundation and language environment for developing other language skills. From the 1980s to the present, the types of exercises and the proportion of exercises to text and grammar have been increased dramatically. In the 1980s, there were usually 5 – 6 types of exercise in each L2 Chinese textbook. This number increased to 25 in the 1990s (Cheng, 2001). For example, one of the best-selling L2 Chinese textbooks *Practical Chinese Readers* (1981) had only three pages of 5 – 6 kinds of exercises for each lesson, but its new version, *New Practical Chinese Readers* (2001), has fifteen pages of exercises for each lesson, which increased more than three times (Zhou & Tang, 2004).

Generally speaking, a sufficient number of exercises is critical for transforming the linguistic rules to practical skills, but it does not mean that more exercises are better. Li (2003) suggests that each course should have about 10 kinds of suitable exercises. Zhou and Tang (2004) recommend that the ratio of the time spent on completing exercises after class and the time spent in the classroom should be 1:1.

Other related issues are to avoid using the same types of exercises in different types of textbooks and to avoid using the same exercise in each lesson. The latter issue is how to distribute various exercises in one textbook so the learners will not be bored and can get used to different ways of studying the target language.

The L2 Chinese textbooks in this research have 1 – 7 kinds of exercise with an average of three for each book. All of them have the same types and same number of exercises for each lesson. They cover 1 – 3 pages. The types of exercises in a textbook sometimes are not suitable to the purpose of the textbook. For example, *Ni Wen Wo Da* is a conversation type of textbook. Each lesson has eight oral sentences as text, and fifteen more sentences to exemplify 3 – 5 grammar points. Each lesson has only two kinds of exercises and 10 sentences in total. Five of the 10 sentences are answering questions. The other five are translation. It therefore has both qualitative and quantitative issues for its exercises.

Additionally, in choosing the teaching materials, factors concerning teachers need to be considered as well. Among seven teacher factors that McGrath (2002) summarizes, the followings are most relevant to this research: (a) methodological style and competence; (b) experience of teaching the kind of learner for whom the materials are being selected; (c) time available for preparation; (d) teacher's language competence including target language and the learner's first language. Textbooks compiled in Japan without much grammatical explanation and with a large quantity of Sino-Japanese translation exercises are not suitable for teachers who are lack of experience of teaching the kind of learners and who are low at both language and methodological competence. Teachers who are used to Northern American teaching styles often feel that the flexibility and diversity of the materials compiled in Japan are very limited. These issues, however, are not under the discussion of this research.

Conclusion

Textbooks are critical for both teaching and learning. Once a textbook is chosen, it will be used for at least a semester, and usually for two semesters in Japan. On most occasions, only after using a certain textbook, the teacher will realize its shortcomings. As a Chinese proverb says that

sharpening a knife saves time on chopping the firewood, so spending time on choosing appropriate textbooks can save unaccountable time and energy for both teachers and students and make the whole process more practical and more efficient. Appropriate textbooks allow teachers to devote their time on analyzing, digesting, and supplementing the teaching materials, as well as improving the teaching quality in general.

Considering pertinence, qualitative scope, and quantification standards, the following are the factors to keep in mind while choosing a textbook for Chinese majors:

1. time length: four years' major; two semesters a year; and 90 – 100 minutes each week;
2. specialty of student body: Japanese students with good training in character writing, but with little knowledge of Chinese language and Chinese culture;
3. qualitative scope: practical but not too academic with focus on business; combine the elements of structure, function, situation, and culture; and proper attention to comparison of Sino-Japanese linguistics and cultures;
4. quantification standards: one semester's phonetic practice; 120 – 150 grammatical points; and 3,000 or so vocabulary, and
5. lots of practice and exercises.

Textbooks decide not only what we teach but also how we teach. To a certain extent, they can decide our failure or success in teaching and learning. As Yang (2003) stated in her *The Current Situation of Chinese Teaching in Japan*: “There are many Chinese textbooks published in Japan every year, but 80% of them fall in the range from elementary level to intermediate level.” (p. 51) In Mainland China, the ratio of elementary, intermediate, and advanced textbooks before 1995 was 3:2:1. After 1995 it became 2:2:1 (Qi, 2003). High quality intermediate and advanced textbooks are the key to changing the situation where students go back and forth at the same level and where students still cannot communicate in Chinese after a few years' learning.

For Japanese learners, we need a set of classic and systematic textbooks including elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels that cover reading, listening, speaking, and writing; we need the textbooks containing Sino-Japanese linguistic and cultural comparisons with a business and economic tendency; and we need textbooks compiled under the rules of second language acquisition: (a) mostly oral content; (b) gradualism; (c) enhance the mastery of vocabulary; and (d) thorough explanation of grammatical rules. The best way is through Sino-foreign cooperation, which was done and are going to be done in many regions: Vietnam, Northern America, England, Spain, Latin America, and Arabic areas.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Brian Rubrecht for his careful reading and commenting on the draft of this article.

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