Teaching Chinese in Cartoons

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Abstract

This article is based on an experience of teaching Chinese in cartoons from the perspectives of course characteristics, students' cultural background and L2 Chinese teaching methodology, and to interpret and analyze the applicability and advantages of using a cartoon textbook for Japanese learners to learn Chinese at the introductory level . Cartoons present static multimedia interface, and instant, situational and cultural contexts. A textbook in cartoons saves teachers' time in setting up an instant context of target language, and leaves a large amount of space for teachers to select appropriate and integrated teaching methods.

Keywords: cartoon, situation in pictures, instant context

Chinese language courses at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business (NUCB) are among elective courses of liberal arts. What should we teach those foreign students who take only one elective Chinese course with two credits during their college years? Answers to this question include teaching emphasis and methods from either the language structure of Chinese or the theory of Chinese teaching. From the perspective of Chinese language structure, the most basic vocabulary and the simplest grammar patterns are the teaching priorities. From the perspective of teaching methodology among grammar-translation, direct, audio-lingual, functional, communicative, and task-based teaching methods, we usually apply one or two of them that reflect teaching goals to receive learning effects.

On Common and Individual Features of TCSL Textbooks (Zhu, 2012) points out that a beginner's L2 Chinese textbook has to include two important perspectives of elementary Chinese as the common features:
1）The basic grammatical elements and syntactical rules including related grammar points; and
2）The syntactical functions and morphological features of Chinese vocabulary and its position in sentences including the mastery of the most commonly used words.

The two specific features of TCSL textbooks for Japanese students are:
1）Identity of Chinese characters; and
2）The most commonly seen word order errors in writing and speaking.
The task concerning the first feature is to avoid the negative transfer of Japanese Kanji while learning Chinese characters (Lincoln, 2009). The task concerning the second feature is to introduce the strict word order of Chinese sentences (Lincoln, 2004).

In *Chinese Basics for Adult Elective Beginners*, Lincoln (2013) advocates to teach college students Chinese phonetics, commonly used vocabulary, and basic sentence patterns in the initial Chinese course to lay

the Chinese foundation for students' self-learning and future learning. According to this conception, *Basic Sentence Patterns of Elementary Chinese* (Zhu, 2013) was originally composed as a textbook of Chinese grammar at the introductory level for Japanese students with a Chinese minor. The composition of this textbook is based on the following rationalities and assumption:

1）The basic structure of Chinese language;
2）General rules of language learning; and
3）The assumption that students have long-term goals for learning Chinese.

But what are students' motives and do they have long-term aims when they select the course? What do they really want to learn in this two-credit course? According to the conception of student-centered learning, a teacher can choose his/her teaching content and method based on either students' long-term learning goal or their current learning interest as long as the teaching content and method are targeted.

Why and What to Learn

A survey on motivation and feedback of elective Chinese courses at NUCB conducted by the author shows that the majority of students took the course out of temporary or casual considerations (Zhu, 2015). They did not have any long-term goals for taking the course. In terms of their motives for electing the course, 63% of them were just for learning a foreign language, 28% of them liking Chinese, and 9% of them for getting two credits. In other words, 72% of respondents took the course not specifically for learning Chinese but out of casual motives, and only 28% of them want to learn some Chinese. What are their aims for learning Chinese, or why do they want to learn Chinese? About half of them learn Chinese for using Chinese at work in the future. More precisely, they wish to be able to use a foreign language in their future jobs because 63% of them took the Chinese course with the motive of learning a foreign language in general. The other half of respondents took the course either for their interest in Chinese culture or for convenience while traveling in China.

As mentioned above, Lincoln (2013) proposes to teach Chinese basics including basic grammar, most commonly used vocabulary, and must-know sentence patterns, for the FOCC (the First and the Only Chinese Course during college years) students. She believes that the Chinese basics can enable adults to learn a simple but complete structure of Chinese language through one textbook; to cultivate a feeling for Chinese by mimicking the natural environment through teaching in the target language; and thus establish a foundation for self-learning or future learning. This conception is more suitable to students who have a clear goal for their Chinese proficiency so that they can use Chinese in their future jobs. However, these students belong to a different category from those of the FOCC because they have to take more than one course to reach the targeted Chinese proficiency. For the FOCC students who are interested in Chinese culture and traveling in China, the objectives for selecting the textbook and teaching method are to enhance students' interest in learning, to meet the learning goals directly, and to bear fruit in the short term.

The data on study hours that students spend outside of class weekly also indicate that the majority of Chinese electives at NUCB do not have a long-term goal for learning Chinese. 77.8% of survey takers have spent less than one hour on self-learning Chinese weekly; 18.5% between one and three hours; only 3.7% between three and five hours; and none of them have spent more than five hours weekly on self-learning Chinese (Zhu, 2015). It can be seen that most students took the course out of occasional and instant motives. Furthermore if they really meant what they responded in the survey that they took the course in order to be able to use Chinese in their future jobs, they would have taken more than one two-credit course and spent more time on self-learning Chinese.

What do students of this category really want to learn? 55% of respondents want to learn conversation skill in the Chinese elective courses, 23% of them prefer to improve their listening skill, and 11% of them

fond of reading. Those who want to focus on writing and grammar are very few with 6% and 5% respectively (Zhu, 2015). What kinds of textbooks are suitable for this type of student group so that the course can satisfy students' learning interest and reach their learning goal? What kinds of teaching methods can help teachers to reach the course goal while ensuring students to learn as much content as possible in a course with two class hours each week? While selecting textbooks teachers usually have two considerations: 1) Chinese as a foreign language or linguistics; and 2) general rules for language learning, in other words, to teach an exhaustive Chinese step by step. In principle, we choose textbooks according to their degrees of difficulty. Specifically, we have to consider the position of that course within the curriculum and its learning goal. For instance, the textbook and teaching method for an introductory Chinese course depends on the characteristic of this course: whether it is one of a few introductory level Chinese courses for freshmen in the curricula either for Chinese major or Chinese minor or it is an elective, two-credit, liberal arts course.

The learning goals of Chinese majors, Chinese minors, and Chinese electives for taking an introductory Chinese course are very different, and their learning attitudes are also not the same. The student group of this research belongs to the 3rd group, consisting of Chinese electives. As the survey results show, some of them took the course for short-term needs such as traveling in China, and some of them took the course just for getting two credits. Even among those who express the wish to use Chinese in their future jobs, only around one-third of them took a second Chinese elective course during their college years. In terms of students' interest in learning Chinese, the majority of them wish to obtain Chinese capability in conversation, and some others wish to be able to understand Chinese people's speech. Only a few of them are interested in learning Chinese writing skill and grammar. Many students wish to learn Chinese through video or multimedia equipment. They are not aware that even the simplest daily conversations are based on certain grammar structures and an accumulation of vocabulary. Under the above considerations, the author has tried a Chinese textbook composed of cartoons with the theme of tourism in order to teach students as much as possible the contents that they really want to learn and that is practical.

101 Sentences of Tourist Chinese in Cartoons (Zhang, Chen, & Peng, 2008) consists only of cartoon pictures with simple dialogues for traveling in China. Students gave the course an unexpected and extremely high evaluation, which reflects students' accreditation of the cartoon textbook, the teacher's teaching method for the course, and their satisfaction with the Chinese skills they have learned on a two-credit course through this textbook. This article seeks to interpret and justify this teaching experience from three perspectives: 1) the comic culture background of Japanese students; 2) situation in pictures and instant context in cartoons; and 3) great space for the course teacher to adopt flexible teaching methods by using a comic textbook.

Cartoon Culture of Japan

Comics and cartoons are the important elements of Japanese culture. As a national cartoon image, the blue cat Doraemon is a household name in Japan. Published in series the magazine of *Doraemon* is a popular reading material for Japanese of all ages. There are more than 50,000 pieces with Doraemon-themed artworks and objects displayed in Doraemon Museum in Tokyo. Most Japanese have understood the lives and experiences of ordinary people and have learned some basic social ethics through cartoons in the *Doraemon* magazine. In addition to the magazine of Doraemon, Japan also has other comic and cartoon characters such as those in comic books for elementary students published monthly, Ninja Turtles and so on.

There are two important characteristics to be found in cartoons in Japanese culture. First, the fields that comics and cartoons cover are not limited to the entertainment industry, but also in the circles of intellectual and social media. Second, the readers of comics are not limited to elementary students, but including

high school students, college students, and crowds of other social statuses. In addition to cartoon books for entertainment, there are various books in cartoons. For instance, those introducing elementary students learning methods with Doraemon as the main character (A), those coaching students in secondary school entry exams in subjects including mathematics, physics, etc. (B), and those telling stories and life experiences to college students and other people in society (C and G). Furthermore, Japanese students can easily learn subject courses in cartoons with a dozen of volumes in length including World History, Japanese History, and Chinese History (D, E, and F). The comic elements are everywhere in daily life and social media
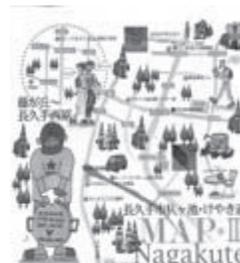
A

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in Japan. For instance, there are many postcards with cartoon figures (H). The advertisements in cartoons for introducing the characteristics and achievements of after school training programs are far more attractive than those in texts (I). Even a map in community newspaper includes several cartoon images as novelties (J).

Readers of comic books in Japan are not limited to elementary students, and most comic books include literal interpretations. The themes and levels of literal interpretations vary according to the types of comic books. Thus, Japanese college students who have grown up watching cartoons have a good understanding of books on many subjects in comics in addition to cartoon books of entertainment. The variety of comic books Japanese students have read cannot be compared with students who have grown up in other cultures. The experience in reading lots of comic books has cultivated their almost intuitive understanding of cartoons.

Comics are motionless cartoons that show static multimedia screens in a relatively simple way to be understood. There are many "cartoonists by nature" among Japanese college students who have high quality in cartoons. Textbooks in Cartoons play a supportive role to these Japanese students who have grown up with comic books. As mentioned above, the majority of students of this research took a Chinese course as a general elective course of liberal arts. Their learning goals are mainly for traveling in China and understanding Chinese culture. What they want to learn the most is the Chinese conversation skill. Students can use the vocabulary and sentences they have learned from the textbook of *101 Sentences of Tourist Chinese in Cartoons* while traveling in China. *101 Sentences of Tourist Chinese in Cartoons* consists of six categories of daily life when traveling in China including transportation, living, eating, traveling, shopping, and entertaining that provide the best learning atmosphere to produce oral skills. The textbook covers many situations from every aspect that a foreigner could possibly run into with each page showing one of the scenes in daily life. As a textbook in Chinese cartoon pictures, it contains some elements of Chinese culture that might be difficult for Japanese students to understand. However, these elements of Chinese culture are much easier to be understood while explaining in cartoons than in characters. Moreover, Japanese students can understand the relevant Chinese cultural elements while learning Chinese language. *101 Sentences of Tourist Chinese in Cartoons* is particularly useful for students who are on study-abroad programs in Beijing or Hong Kong, and students who plan to go to China on a graduation trip or family vacation. In addition, learning and understanding Chinese culture in cartoons is helpful for students to understand some questions in the listening part with cartoon pictures in various Chinese external tests.

Situations in Pictures and Instant Context

In learning the Chinese language, Japanese "always attach great importance to reading and not really pay attention to oral and listening practices." Most of college students and graduates in Japan "cannot communicate and exchange ideas in Chinese" (Hu & He, 1984). In *Characteristics of Japanese Personality and the Impact on their Chinese Learning*, Liang (1994) has compared Japanese students with European and American students and considers Japanese students "discreet and introverted." Japanese students achieve relatively high scores in listening, reading and writing. But in terms of speaking, European and American students blend in more easily whereas Japanese students are reluctant to speak off the cuff. Teachers should create a relaxed environment that cultivates students' oral expression ability in Chinese. Comic style is more colloquial and humorous, and it is easier to get pleasure while learning from cartoons (Lien, Lin, & Chiu, 2011).

There are three types of comic textbooks in TCSL: textbooks with a single cartoon picture, a few cartoon pictures, or all cartoon pictures. Using a single cartoon picture as supplementary teaching material is relatively common in TCSL. The range of this usage is also relatively wide including phonetics, vo-

cabulary, characters, and grammar. It is even more popular to use the cartoon picture in teaching spoken language (Yang, 2007). Using a single picture as visual teaching material is also called the icon method. Yang (2011) considers the icon method the most commonly used means of teaching communicative skill better and faster as well as the easiest way for students to understand the content. Among various visual materials, using pictures is more prominent and convenient. We can divide visual materials into two categories: those of cards or real things, and those of pictures or talking about pictures. The former provides visual images for words and phrases, and is suitable for beginners to learn and remember words and phrases. The latter inspires students to construct sentences according to the images, and is more suitable for students who have learned basic syntax and simple conversation skills. Comics include the above-mentioned two kinds of visual images, and combine characters and pictures, conversations and scenes together on the screens. In addition, through a few coherent caricatures, it provides situations in pictures and real-time contexts for Chinese learning. In this way, Chinese learning starts a transition from literal understanding to imitation of context images so that students can repeatedly practice in similar instant contexts in the future.

Deng (2010) states "teaching Chinese in a non-Chinese context, it lacks natural instant contexts for L2 Chinese learning." Therefore, creating instant contexts is very important, which is so-called "contextual input." Comic material can be used as a form of contextual input in a non-Chinese environment. In addition, cartoons present not only "situational context" but also "cultural context" of the second language in an instant context. Teachers who use general materials need to set up different real time contexts according to the content of texts. However, every page in a cartoon textbook is an instant context presenting some cultural elements that are subtle but difficult to explain. Cartoons integrate the linguistic-cultural context and communicative context into an instant context. While students practice conversation looking at the cartoon page, it closely combines the imitation and internalization aspects of language learning, and shortens the process from practice to use in language learning.

The focus on fostering students' conversational ability is to provide students real-time contexts and context images in classroom teaching. Appropriate verbal teaching "firstly requires texts in colloquial language," "secondly requires texts easy for students to practice and repeat" (Hu & He, 1984). The L2 Chinese textbooks the author has used can be divided into two broad categories: those that are written step by step according to grammatical structure without any contextual pictures, let alone real time contexts; and those that are written according to specific contexts and consist of conversational texts, often equipped with a DVD. However, many sentences in texts lack the practical universality, neither are they colloquial. If we use a textbook of the above-mentioned two categories to train students' oral ability in a two-credit elective course, it will result in either just imitating example sentences and conducting simple question-and-answer or mimicking the dialogues in fixed contexts. Neither of the two types of textbooks can guide students to flexibly use the language they have learned in real time contexts.

Zhang (2007) raises the issues of "introduction of culture," "revelation of culture" and "teaching culture in the language" in TCSL, and points out, "Chinese language rules involve a wide range of cultural content, in which the impact on language habits from traditional cultural concepts formed as the accumulation of a long term history are the learning difficulties. Because of the little understanding of Chinese communicative culture and norms, students inevitably migrate some mother-tongue language rules in the use of Chinese and result in 'negative transfer' in target language application." This is a common problem but difficult to deal with in an elective Chinese course at the introductory level. First, most of the students are not familiar with Chinese culture when they start learning Chinese, negative transfers of mother tongue culture happen at all times. Second, introductory Chinese starts with pronunciation, common words, and simple sentences. Although it can pass some elements of Chinese culture including Chinese characters, the solid foundation in Japanese Kanji of Japanese students has both positive and negative transfers on Chinese character learning. Third, given the nature of language courses, teachers cannot and should not spend

much time on introducing Chinese culture in students' mother tongue in order to avoid negative transfers in the usage of Chinese characters, especially in a two-credit course.

Integration of Three Links of Language Learning

"There are relatively little research of using cartoons" in TCSL (Lien, Lin, & Chiu, 2011). "Research results in using comics to teach are so little as almost a blank" (Zhang, 2013). Zhang (2012) discusses how he used the method of "telling the comic stories" to "help students prepare for HSK (Chinese External Test)," and help students distinguish the multiple cartoon pictures in "telling the comic stories" and single cartoon picture of "writing about picture" part in HSK. Zhang (2013) "demonstrates the promoting effect of vision and auditory imagery codes on second language writing and L2 Chinese writing, and thus demonstrates the theoretical feasibility of using comics in L2 Chinese writing course." In Singapore, there are more students coming from English speaking families. Chinese teachers tried a comic textbook that can bring out different modes of thinking. Due to the lack of cartoon teaching resources across the country, Singapore issued one handbook for creative teaching to each of 3000 Chinese teachers in primary schools. This handbook points out that comics present learning themes that resonate with students the most. Teaching through cartoons, teachers practice innovative teaching and enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning.[1]

Zhao (2010) summarizes three links embodying the general aspects of language teaching (or three-phase, three plates, three steps): understanding, practicing, and using the language structure that is the core of all links or aspects. Language structure implies the three elements of the language: phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar, which are the foundation of any languages. Generally, the first Chinese course is a comprehensive one that targets the three key elements. On this basis, "it adds four courses at different stages respectively: speaking, listening, reading, and writing" (Zhao, 2010). The teaching methods of these courses vary because of their different teaching objectives. Whatever the method, such as grammar-translation, direct, audio-oral, functional, communicative, or task-oriented method, has its teaching focus and strengths but not the overwhelming advantage. In practice, most of the teachers do what they need for their own purpose. We can consider this process either the development of a comprehensive approach or the integration of various teaching methods. Especially in a two-credit elective course, the two aspects are tied up and fused together.

In *Chinese Basics for Adult Elective Beginners* (Lincoln, 2013), the author proposes to teach phonetics, vocabulary, and basic grammar in students' only Chinese course with two-credits during their college years, and discusses the three points of such a comprehensive Chinese elective course: academism, structure, and integration. As mentioned above, the survey results show two categories of students' objectives of taking Chinese elective course: for academic or practical purpose. The former is expressed as "using Chinese in the future jobs", and the latter expressed as "traveling in China" or "understanding Chinese culture" (Zhu, 2015). On the one hand, we should consider students' motives for taking the course of both categories while selecting the textbook and teaching method. One is for a comprehensive course for students who wish to use Chinese at work in the future, or possibly continue their Chinese learning. The teaching content of this Chinese course with an academic purpose focuses on the structure of Chinese language, and is taught in a comprehensive approach, which would be at a similar level to the beginning courses in curricula of either Chinese major or Chinese minor. The other type of two-credit Chinese elective course is more of an oral course for students who want to travel in China or to understand Chinese culture. The teaching content of this Chinese course with a practical purpose focuses on the function of Chinese language, and

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1   http://www.mandarinhouse.com.cn/news/201303191681.html

is taught in task-oriented approach. On the other hand, the majority of survey respondents is interested in learning oral skills, and wants to be able to communicate in Chinese. Then we have to choose a textbook to meet the needs of the majority, which was the original thought of the author to choose a textbook of daily conversation in cartoons.

While this article testimonializes cartoon textbooks, its intention is consistent with the article mentioned above, emphasizing on meeting students' different learning objectives and needs. This article discusses the three points of such an oral Chinese elective course: practicality, function, and tasks. Although it is difficult to take both academism and practicality into account while allowing both structure and function, teachers can balance two aspects through an integrated teaching method. Based on comprehensive teaching methodology, Zhu (2013) attaches simple question and answer to basic sentences in *Basic Sentence Patterns of Elementary Chinese* with recording so that students can practice listening and dialogues inside and outside the classroom. *Chinese 101 in Cartoons (For Travelers)* (Zhang, Chen, & Peng, 2008) is composed according to the conceptions of functional and communicative approaches. In using this textbook, the author emphasized the training in phonetics, and added materials for pronunciation exercises other than the textbook. The first task of each lesson was to learn vocabulary including correct pronunciation and lexical comprehension. Explaining the grammatical structure and features before practicing the conversation text, which helps students practice the conversation with an understanding. In a two-credit elective course, the real matter is not the phase difference but the priorities of teaching and learning in terms of understanding, practice and use.

Cartoons as the illustrations of a textbook are different from cartoons as the whole of a textbook. The former is as supplemental material of a textbook that does not have a direct impact on the implementation of the teaching method in using the textbook. However, the latter has a direct impact on the teaching method of the course. A textbook based on conversational text with a video is also different from a textbook in cartoons. The former embodies the individuality of a certain situation, and the latter covers various contextual commonalities. The so-called commonalities imply both that of the same language of Chinese or various Chinese contexts and that of similar contexts of different languages. The commonalities of Chinese contexts help students understand the basic scenarios of Chinese conversation, and apply the commonalities in similar situations. The commonalities of similar contexts of different languages help students reach a resonance and reduce the negative transfer in using the language due to cultural differences.

Chinese 101 in Cartoons (For Travelers) (Zhang, Chen, & Peng, 2008) consists of simple dialogues on 6 themes, of 29 situations, and in 125 cartoon pictures with a teaching focus on conversation. The author added the explanation and practice in phonetics because the textbook only briefly introduces Chinese phonetics. However, practices in phonetics and pronunciation are a necessary first step to oral acquisition and conversational ability. In addition to the pronunciation exercises at the beginning of class, the course leads students to repeatedly practice the pronunciation of words prior to the oral practice of each context. Dialogues in comics are typically concise. Students understand the conversational situations in cartoons at a glance, and teachers can explain the grammar in a more relaxed way. For much of time the whole class was engaged in drills so that the proportion of instruction and practice reaches between one to eight and one to ten. The practice covers areas of phonetics, listening, and conversation in the following forms: focusing on accurate pronunciation in learning vocabulary, listening to the recording of conversation, repeatedly practicing the dialogues of texts, and replace drills on words and figures. Comparing with the other Chinese elective courses at the introductory level, students in this two-credit course using a comic textbook have more opportunities in conversational practices. In other words, the main class activity of the course is oral practice that meets students' needs in oral learning. The 29 situations of the textbook that cover six plates of Chinese culture including going, living, eating, sightseeing, shopping, and playing meet students' aspirations of understanding Chinese culture.

Conclusion

The meanings of using comics as the textbook of an elective introductory Chinese course for Japanese college students are as follows. First, reading comics is a learning method that Japanese students have been used to from an early age. Japanese college students grew up learning and being entertained by cartoons, and have an almost intuitive understanding of comics. Cartoon textbooks can play a role of resonance among Japanese students who have grown up with comics. Second, generally speaking, teachers introduce the oral content especially situational conversation after students have a certain basis and ability in that language. The best learning environment for spoken language is among various situations in everyday life. One characteristic of using comic for oral learning is that it presents various instant contexts in a non-Chinese environment. Cartoon textbooks integrate characters, pictures, situations and conversations. A few pictures replace teachers' repeated explanations in students' mother tongue. It allows the course to enter dialogues and drills right after vocabulary learning and a simple introduction of sentence patterns. Third, whether students are able to complete the three links of language learning in understanding, practicing, and using in a two-credit course depends on textbooks and related teaching methods. In using cartoon textbooks, teachers can integrate the essences of various teaching methods, including direct, task-oriented, comprehensive methods, and naturally integrate the three plates of language learning. Comics are static cartoons but can be accompanied by audio sound, in which we can conduct a large number of replacement exercises in the same context. The context images from the cartoon textbooks play a certain role of association in students' future use. In conclusion, Chinese textbooks in cartoons are suitable for Japanese students in terms of their cultural backgrounds and learning habits. It not only meets students' aspiration of oral skill learning, but also gives teachers the flexibility in teaching choices. Learning in cartoons connects the three stages of language learning through understanding and flexible applications of the images.

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