Premier’s Kingold Chinese Language Teacher Scholarship

Best practice in teaching the cultural elements

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Rationale

In the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*(2008), which is a nationally agreed education agenda for Australia for 2008-2018 and approved by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), it has been recognised that “the growing influence of India, China and other Asian nations, both globally and in Australia, is a major change in the world that impacts on the future of all young Australians”. In the same document, it is stated that “Australians need to become ‘Asia literate’, engaging and building strong relationships with Asia”.

According to the *National Statement on Asia Literacy in Australian Schools 2011-2012*, which supports the *Melbourne Declaration*, Asian languages and cross curriculum studies of Asia are both critical to building an Asia literate Australia. In other words, the purpose of studies of Asia is not only to support Asian languages education, but also to ‘ensure that every young Australian has the broad knowledge to develop intercultural skills and understandings to participate in, learn from, contribute to and engage confidently in diverse cultural environments at home and abroad and enrich their own and Australia’s creative, intellectual and social development’.

Context

In the NSW Chinese syllabuses (*Chinese K-10*, *Chinese Continuers* and *Heritage Chinese* stage 6 courses), ‘culture’ is always mentioned in the teaching objectives. ‘Moving between cultures’, ‘Understanding aspects of the language and culture of the Chinese-speaking communities’ and ‘Making connections between Chinese and English and between their heritage culture and other cultures’ are three important objectives that appear in each of the three syllabuses.

In order to help teachers to understand these objectives, the respective syllabuses provide even more detailed information by listing all the outcomes that students are expected to achieve. For example, in the Continuers Syllabus, it is stated that students are expected to identify values, attitudes and beliefs of cultural significance. The K-10 Syllabus also provides a statement of content that may be taught in the form of *learn about* and *learn to* statements connected to the course outcomes. For example, students in Stage 4 are expected to learn about the importance of tradition to a sense of cultural identity and diversity within the culture, and to learn to identify and explain features of traditional and contemporary lifestyle.

In the Heritage Syllabus, detailed outcomes are also listed. For example, when interacting with others to exchange meaning, students are expected to ‘recognise and use language appropriate to different cultural contexts’ or ‘develop bilingual and bicultural identity’. When creating texts to express meaning, they are supposed to ‘apply knowledge of cultural concepts’, or ‘to express ideas and opinions from a bilingual and bicultural perspective’.

However, these syllabuses provide no guidance to teachers and students regarding the selection of cultural aspects, leaving individual teachers to do a great deal of work on their own.

Definition

What is ‘culture’? What are cultural aspects in the second language teaching and learning process? There are many different definitions of ‘culture’ around the world. According to Bi (2009),‘culture’ comprises both immaterial and material products from a broad perspective; however, from a narrower perspective, ‘culture’ is seen as only immaterial products, including languages, literature, arts and all ideologies. Another definition is that ‘culture’ is ‘daily life’. Liu, also a respected expert, thinks that ‘culture’ consists of both immaterial and material. The former is ideologies reflected by social relations of production, such as law, politics, arts or philosophies; the latter is material lifestyles produced by social relations of production, such as basic necessities of the daily life (food, clothing, shelter or transportation). Moreover, both Bi and Liu consider that language is the carrier of culture.

Although people may not agree completely about what ‘culture’ represents, one thing is for sure: ‘culture’ is the ideology and behaviour learnt throughout life. In this respect, there is an Australian perspective as well. According to Scarino and Liddicoat (2009:19), ‘culture’ is not simply a body of knowledge but rather a framework in which people live their lives and communicate shared meaning with each other. Therefore, cultural aspects in language education should be addressed in the context of language teaching/learning.

Questions and Methods

In order to find out ‘what to teach’ and ‘how to teach’, a series of questions was produced before the trip:

* 1. Which cultural aspects should be included within a language lesson/course?
  2. Should the cultural aspects be separated from the Chinese language teaching?
  3. How do you integrate cultural aspects into Chinese language teaching and learning?
  4. What do most teachers of Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) think about the Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning approach?
  5. What resources do you use to teach cultural aspects?
  6. How do you separate cultural knowledge and cultural practice?

The methods that I have chosen for studying this topic include interviewing experts, attending lessons, discussing key issues with teachers and their students, and reading relevant information and texts.

Findings

Since culture covers such an immense area and, as a result, is considered as a set of topics, and if we adopt a view that students should understand the fundamental connection between language and culture, it is nearly impossible for language teachers to cover everything. Interviews with experts in CSL revealed that, in the context of CSL, culture has been divided into knowledge of culture and communicative culture by some Chinese experts. While the example of the former is the use of chopsticks by Chinese people, a good example of the latter is that it is rude to stick chopsticks into the dish or rice bowl when serving the meals (Liu, interview). Although the amount of knowledge of culture that one possesses may affect the communication, it won’t cause much misunderstanding because it is only a matter of how much one knows. However, communicative culture is usually embedded in the system of values, lifestyles, customs or moralities. Inappropriate behaviour results from the lack of communicative culture and may offend people from other cultures. Therefore, the main purpose of teaching second language is to develop learners’ cross-cultural/ intercultural communicative competence (跨文化交际能力) (Bi, 2009:16).

Although (跨文化交际能力) was mentioned by many people interviewed, it was not clear to me until I read Bi’s definition (2009:10) which states from a broad perspective, both ‘cross-cultural communication’ and ‘intercultural communication’ are translated as ‘跨文化交际’ since they are both used to refer to the communication between people from different cultures. However, from a narrower perspective, they are different in terms of theory and research methodology. The former focuses on investigating the cultural norms and rules that affect human behaviours, the latter concentrates on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the communication between different cultures. In other words, the cross-cultural communication addresses the comparison of a social phenomenon or a language format. However, the intercultural communication focuses on learning to communicate in the context of cultural difference in the process of communication. Therefore, Bi thinks that the former should be translated as ‘跨文化比较论’ (Cross-cultural comparison), and the latter should be ‘跨文化交际’ (Intercultural communication) or ‘跨文化交际学’ (Intercultural communication study).

This difference can justify the basic concept of Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning (ILTL) approach in the Australian context. One of the key features of the approach is to encourage learners to reflect on their own culture, and the assumptions they bring to their communication, in the process of learning the target culture to find an effective way of moving between the two.

The ILTL approach to languages education has been endorsed nationally in Australia since the release of *The National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005-2008* (MCEETYA, 2005). Although this document has expired and not yet updated, it represents “a fundamental shift in the orientation of language teaching and learning beyond the communicative approach of the last 20 years” (Orton, 2008a).

My study tour demonstrated that similar viewpoints have been expressed in China. Many experts interviewed were talking about cross-cultural communication in the context of language teaching and learning. According to Liu (2000):

1. Cultural differences may cause communication breaking down, misunderstanding and, in extreme case, even conflicts.
2. The principles of communication are usually based on different values.
3. People who have not got a chance to experience other cultures tend to stick with their own cultures and may have bias or prejudices against other cultures.
4. In the process of communication, people from different cultural backgrounds tend to seek the common ground because this will help communication.
5. Cross-cultural communication is actually an interaction between different cultures. Therefore, the result of communication will be mutual cultural influences.

However, this breakdown of characteristics again separates language and culture. Liu’s idea is definitely cultural but not necessarily *inter*cultural. In addition, it focuses on *mis*communication rather than intended. On the other hand, the intercultural orientation as reflected in the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages*, states that in order to help all young Australians to become responsible local and global citizens, equipped through their education for living and working successfully in the globalised world of the 21st century, their learning must include intercultural understanding, which:

1. Develops through sustained interaction between people from different cultural groups and their efforts to understand and relate to one another. It focuses on personal and social knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills that students need in learning to live together in a multicultural and multilingual world;
2. Allows students to investigate their own and others’ cultures, developing their self-awareness and sense of belonging. They learn to empathise with others and to reflect on their learning as a means of better understanding themselves and people they perceive to be different from themselves; and
3. Builds students’ sense of their own cultural identity and the cultural values that underpin Australian society. They learn to take responsibility for their interactions with others and for developing and improving relationships between people from different cultures in Australia and in the wider world.

These expectations are not only applied to Second Language learners, but also to background/ heritage learners. After all, both groups are moving between cultures by learning a target language, although the latter has the opportunity to engage the target language much earlier in their life. During one interview with Y. Zhang of Beijing University, the writer was directed to the American document, *Standards for foreign language learning in the 21st century*. Although the term ‘intercultural communication/understanding’ is not mentioned in the *Standards*, it requires learners to ‘understand the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own’. This is actually one of the key features of the ILTL approach. As Scarino and Liddicoat (2009:6) say, “through the experience of communicating across cultures and reflecting on that process, people develop an intercultural capability and sensitivity”.

Although many Chinese experts (including Liu, Zhao and Y. Zhang) agree that it is necessary to apply the principles of cross-cultural communication into the CSL, few teachers are trained for this approach. One of the main reasons is that teachers are obliged to work within the curriculum structures, such as syllabuses or textbooks, especially in courses run by universities. Yang and Ji from Fudan University, Shanghai, said that they were happy to provide more cultural experiences for students, such as making dumplings, but could not because they simply had not enough time to complete the course requirements. Moreover, Wu and Chang admitted that most Chinese teachers still had the traditional way of teaching, that is, focusing on pronunciation, grammar and structures believing that that cultural knowledge should be taught separately. It seems that most teachers in China are still focusing on cultural elements, instead of cultural dimensions.

Another crucial point is that teachers might not have a comprehensive knowledge of the target and their own culture. Many volunteer Chinese teachers, who went overseas to teach Chinese, have brought back a lot of precious, first-hand experiences (Xu, YouTube) to China. However, in order to play an effective role of ‘bridge’ or ‘mediator’ (Bi, 2009:15), a CSL teacher needs to be not only bilingual, but also bicultural, or at least, to be able to operate interculturally. In other words, they need to be able to negotiate meanings across languages and cultures demanding that they possess an effective intercultural capability before they can help their students.

According to Chang of National Chengchi Culture University, Taipei, and Y. Zhang, teachers need to keep learning and developing themselves professionally.Y. Zhang believes that teachers need to respect others’ cultures because all cultures have their own merits and shortcomings. Chinese culture is no exception having some ideas still applicable and other that can be discarded. She thinks that, when teaching culture, teachers need to provide opportunities for learners to reflect on their own culture, instead of just focusing on the target culture. Moreover, she thinks that teachers need to place more stress on cultural similarities rather than differences when comparing cultures. The purpose of intercultural communication is to avoid the misunderstanding and conflicts between different cultures. Although I agree with her ideas, I believe that the purpose of intercultural communication should be to learn how to be intercultural communicators and mediators, not just avoid misunderstandings and conflicts.

According to Shen, who teaches culture in Fudan University, people have been arguing the need for separate cultural objectives or syllabuses since the 1980s and 1990s. However, so far, no commonly agreed syllabus of culture has been produced. The main reason was that people could not agree with the definition of culture and what cultural aspects should be covered in the syllabus. Although the *International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education* (国际汉语教学通用大纲), which is published by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban) in 2008, has identified the cross-cultural awareness that learners need to achieve for each level of Chinese Language Proficiency Test (HSK), namely that‘(students) learn to view their own culture more objectively by engaging in comparisons between some elements of Chinese culture and their own’, it doesn’t suggest any specific cultural aspects for each level that need to be covered.

Although many CSL teachers in China believe that culture and language knowledge should be taught separately, they nevertheless agree that cultural aspects should be embedded in the language teaching at the early stages(Shen, Yang and Ji), especially for young learners**.**

Interestingly, most experts interviewed in Taiwan (Chang and Tseng) think that cultural aspects should be derived from topics and contexts, and integrated into language teaching at all levels**.** They think it is important that students have opportunities to compare and contrast two different cultures. As to the content, however, it depends on learners’ age, interests, cognitive development and background knowledge. This viewpoint, actually, coincides with the principles of a student-centred approach. According to Tseng, learners at the beginner level should be encouraged to comprehend the target culture, comparing with and connecting to their own. In the higher level, however, learners should be asked to explain, discuss and research intercultural dimensions. In other words, cultural aspects are part of the language lessons and they should be delivered according to students’ language capacity and cognitive development.

In this respect, Liu has proposed similar principles. He thinks that:

* 1. Cultural aspects should be part of the language teaching and should be taught in accordance with the language. From the perspective of teaching process, it should start with cultural aspects derived from languages, then gradually move to cultural knowledge of the nation, and, finally, lift to the specific cultural knowledge for special courses.
  2. Teachers need to focus on difficulties and barriers faced by learners when engaging in cross-cultural communication and interaction.
  3. Teachers need to emphasise the mainstream, contemporary and representative culture, instead of local, sub-and-marginalised cultures.
  4. Since culture is dynamic and developing, teachers need to update their own knowledge, especially about youth culture.
  5. Teachers need to help learners transfer cultural knowledge into cross-cultural communicative capacity.

Conclusion

Throughout this study tour, I confirmed that the cross-cultural awareness is indeed becoming an important issue of CSL in both China and Taiwan. Most experts strongly agree that CSL teachers must pay more attention to cultural dimensions when teaching Chinese language to non-native learners. After all, in order to communicate effectively and successfully learners need to ‘know what, how, when, and why, to say to whom’. This requires not only language skills, but also cross-cultural communicative capacity.

However, since many teachers in China and Taiwan still believe that cultural aspects in CSL should be taught separately, they see these as elements rather than dimensions. This differs from the ILTL approach. Although some Chinese CSL experts, such as Bi, Liu, Chang and Tseng, strongly agree that the intercultural approach towards language teaching is the way to go, many teachers are still lagging behind.

Owing to China’s strong relationships with the US, who is its biggest CSL market, China is following America’s foreign language teaching ideas closely. For example, the concepts of cultural products (e.g. books, food, tools, law, music or games, etc.), practices (e.g. ways of social communication) and perspectives (e.g. attitudes, viewpoints or values, etc.) have become popular discussion points among teachers and experts in China (Luo). Considering that the general approaches to foreign language teaching in the US and Australia are similar in terms of content and focus, and that the Australian intercultural approach is more dynamic, it can be concluded that Australian perspectives towards teaching culture are relevant and significant to CSL teachers in China and Taiwan. As Scarino and Liddicoat (2009:20) suggest, approaches to teaching culture can be either static or dynamic, which means culture can be seen as ‘a static body of information about characteristics of a society’ or as ‘a dynamic system through which a society constructs, represents, enacts and understands itself’. From this perspective, it can be said that the CSL teachers in China and Taiwan have something to learn from the Australian approach.

In conclusion, in order to help students achieve the cultural outcomes prescribed in K-10 Chinese, HSC Chinese Continuers Stage 6 and HSC Heritage Chinese Stage 6 syllabuses, NSW Chinese language teachers need to encourage learners to compare and contrast the target and their own cultures, to reflect on learners’ own cultures, and to ‘create personal meanings about one’s experiences, communicate those meanings, explore those meanings and reshape them in response to others’ (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009:23). In other words, teachers should focus on processes of developing intercultural awareness, and learners should actively engage with cultural practices of Chinese people.

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Beijing Normal University, Beijing - Ms Feng, Li Ping; Ms Zhu, Zhi Ping

Beijing University, Beijing - Ms Zhang, Ying

Hanban (the Office of Chinese Language Council International/Confucius Institute Headquarters), Beijing - Mrs Wang, Jin Hong

Fudan University, Shanghai - Mr Wu, Zhong Wei; Mr Shen, Zhen Hui; Ms Yang, Rong Rong; Ms Ji, Xiao Jing

Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing - Mr Zhang, Xiao Feng; Mr Wei, Qing Qi

National Chengchi Culture University, Taipei - Mr Chang, Shang-Kuan

National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei - Mrs Tseng, Chin-Chin