

Issues in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language

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Abstract

In this paper, we look at some major issues relating to the academic discipline of teaching Chinese as a second/foreign language (L2 Chinese). Some issues concern Taiwan locally while others apply globally. These issues indicate where the discipline has not reached adequate rigor and needs to be further addressed and resolved in the field. Of the three components of L2 Chinese, viz. linguistics, psycholinguistics, and education, the last-listed, generally referred to as pedagogy, is the field least developed in Taiwan, or actually globally. Considerations of the name in Chinese of the field of L2 Chinese will be extensively probed next, though no easy and tidy solution can be conveniently resolved. The status of the Chinese script both linguistically and applied-linguistically has aroused much discussion in the field lately, and it will be suggested that it is a moot question linguistically, and, in its pedagogy, it is merely one of the components of L2 Chinese. The issue of Chinese generally conceived of as being a difficult language will be in this paper reexamined. Lastly, the basic properties of Hanyu Pinyin will be presented semiotically here.

Keywords: L2 Chinese, L2 Chinese as a discipline, Chinese script, difficult language, pinyin

1. Introduction

1995 marked Taiwan's recognition and the establishment of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL) at the master's degree level. That was the beginning of a series of graduate programs in this academic discipline in Taiwan. A quarter of a century has witnessed the healthy local development of the field as well as its active participation in the field globally. This paper examines this discipline in Taiwan in greater detail and discusses what accomplishments have been achieved and what improvements are yet to be dealt with.

2. Issue #1: The Three Modules of TCSL.

As in the case of any language as a second language (L2), TCSL incorporates 3 modules, i.e. linguistics, L2 acquisition, and L2 pedagogy. In linguistics, Chinese syntax 漢語語法 is universally included in the curriculum. Chinese morphology 構詞學, on the other hand, is rarely seen in the curriculum in Taiwan. Instead, studies in Chinese vocabulary 詞匯學 is a common substitute. Chinese phonology, again, is seldom observed in the field in Taiwan. In its stead, Chinese pronunciation 語音學 is offered. A course on Chinese semantics would be a rare offer in Taiwan. On the other hand, Chinese pragmatics is occasionally encountered. Without training in phonology, it would be very difficult for L2 Chinese instructors to explain, e.g., how vowel-retroflexivization 兒化韻 works or explain the complex rules of 3rd-tone sandhi 三聲變調 in modern Chinese/Mandarin.

Language acquisition is a small field in Taiwan, and L2 Chinese acquisition is even more esoteric. General introductions to the field are common in the curriculum, but very rarely have such courses been accompanied by first-hand, systematic L2 acquisition research results in relation to modern Chinese. Error analysis is the commonest form of observation and discussion. Bibliography in L2 Chinese acquisition, especially relating to developmental studies, is at best very brief and short. There is much room for growth in this area in Taiwan.

The pedagogy component of the discipline is the weakest. Taiwan has had a long tradition of small-class instruction, sometimes down to individual students, which is, however, believed in the field in Taiwan to be the optimal form of instruction. Moreover,

it is quite common to have a small class of students, each representing one nationality. Trained in a context such as this, which is atypical of the L2 Chinese world outside of Taiwan, graduates of L2 Chinese from Taiwan are ill-prepared for the real world. Secondly, and this is very serious, there's widely held prejudice in the academic circles in Taiwan, that language teaching is easy and is thus not suited for the ranks of professors. As a consequence, except for some recruited from overseas, no professors in the Taiwan L2 Chinese field have first-hand teaching experience in L2 Chinese. They can only lecture in the abstract. Nevertheless, there's one highly encouraging and positive point in the Taiwan L2 Chinese scene, i.e. most MA programs offer Chinese Pedagogical Grammar, aka principles underlying the instruction of grammar, a course not commonly seen on Mainland China or elsewhere in the world.

3. Issue #2: Name of our Language.

This issue ought to amaze or amuse the whole world. Naming ought to be the simplest thing in our life. Yet, this is true: we don't have a name for the language we are teaching, in Chinese that is. In English, 'Chinese' is a magic term. It's context-free, i.e. it can be used in any context, linguistic or otherwise, e.g. Chinese people, Chinese language, Chinese food, Chinese grammar, etc. Thus, 'Chinese' can be short for Chinese people or the Chinese language, and it can also be an adjective of the noun China, referring to the country. Sometimes, it does not really make any sense, e.g. Chinese language (one (?) of the numerous languages spoken in China), but it is forgiven. In Chinese, on the other hand, we have 漢語, 現代漢語, 普通話, 國語, 華語, 中文, 中國話.

漢語 is widely used in Mainland China but is unknown in Taiwan among the general population. It refers to Mandarin, standard Northern language 北方官話, though academically the term includes all Han dialects. 普通話 is almost entirely interchangeable with 漢語 on the mainland in so far as their function is concerned, though distinct in substance. Again, 普通話 is not used in Taiwan. 國語 is used in Taiwan in two different ways, meaning either 'official language' 國家語言 or 'lingua franca', similar to 普通話, both of which are socio-linguistic concepts, not referring to the language itself like 漢語. 華語, another socio-linguistic term, was originally borrowed from Southeast Asia, referring to the lingua franca among Chinese

descendants of numerous Chinese dialects. Furthermore, this lingua franca is intended to be used in communication with all Chinese people globally. It's based essentially on 普通話. The term has since taken on great extensions in Taiwan and elsewhere, as will be explained in the following paragraphs. 中文 is the most neutral term used in Taiwan, referring to the language per se (Mandarin Chinese), connotation-free. The term may have historically referred to the written script, but it has already been lexicalized so that both 說中文 and 寫中文 are accepted. 中國話 is deceptive. While such definitions as 日本人都說日本話 are meaningful, 中國人都說中國話 may not be accepted in certain regions of China. Strictly speaking, there's no language that can be referred to as *?中國話, cf. *印度話. When used by the general population, it loosely refers to Mandarin.

The paragraph above deals with the term itself of the language we teach. When applying the term to the L2 frame, it's a simple formula in the case of other languages, e.g. Japanese as a second/foreign language, or in the case of Chinese in the English frame, i.e. Chinese as a second/foreign language, but the formula does not work in the Chinese language, e.g. *中文教學研究所 (graduate school of teaching Chinese as a second language), *中大中文中心 (Chinese Language Center, Zhongshan University). The reality is that, except for one institution, all Chinese language centers in Taiwan are called 華語中心, and all graduate programs in L2 Chinese use the label 華語文教學研究所 without exceptions.

This uniformity in the choice of terminology was unfortunate. First and foremost, 華語 is a socio-linguistic concept and should not be used to refer to a language. Secondly, the use of 華語 is not without problems in Taiwan, especially among the general population as well as among the learners. For instance, a foreign student cannot ask a group of Taiwan natives '你們在一起的時候說*華語嗎?' The term in that context is not easily accepted. The term should have been 國語. Furthermore, the use of 華語 has led some scholars in Taiwan into thinking of it as a reference to a language, producing books and articles entitled *華語語法 and *華語能願動詞.

To sum up, the term 華語 as used today among the L2 Chinese circles in Taiwan underwent the path of evolution like this: 世界華僑 => 東南亞華語 => 國外華人 => 外國人學習中文. Thus, this should be distinct from the use of 華語 on Mainland today, where other terms such as 大華語 and 中文 have recently been promoted. (陸

儉，2015)

4. Issue #3: 一元論，二元論 etc.

Originally a philosophical term, 二元論 has recently cropped up again in L2 Chinese discussions over the internet or talks, especially by Prof. Bellassen. Our present discussion concerns not so much on 一元論, 二元論 as on the etc. part. The whole issue has its origin in a theory proposed in 徐通鏗 (2008) and in his earlier writings, i.e. 字本位, which, according to him, underlies the Chinese language, while Indo-European languages are based on 詞, i.e. 詞本位. Linguistically, a language is either X-based or Y-based, not and/or. This is the basic principle of 一元論. But linguistically nobody has ever raised the point that a language, especially Indo-European languages, is word-based 詞本位, a concept not possible in our linguistic theories. Nor can a language be script-based 字本位, as the script is merely an add-on to a language and many languages today have no scripts, e.g. the Southern Min dialect spoken in Taiwan, a tongue native to most of us in Taiwan. 字本位 is linguistically non-valid. In short, 徐通鏗 (2008) wrongly proposed that Chinese is script-oriented rather than word-oriented. Either 詞 or 字, Chinese, like all languages, has one orientation. This is 一元論 in China. 二元論, on the other hand, would state that a language is both 詞本位 and 字本位. This is theoretically impossible. This would, for example, amount to stating that some languages are topic-prominent and some subject-oriented (Li & Thompson, 1981), while some others are both topic- and subject-oriented. 二元論 is an impossibility in linguistics.

Bellassen (2018) shifted the linguistic platform to that of L2 Chinese and most strongly promoted the 字本位 approach to L2 Chinese pedagogy. He stated that greater proficiency in the Chinese language could be achieved on the basis of 字本位 pedagogy rather than the traditional 詞本位 pedagogy. This is his proposed strategy in tackling a so-called difficult language, difficult due to its script system. However, his proposal is most unfortunate in several respects. First, his proposal mixes and confuses two distinct levels, linguistics and applied linguistics/pedagogy. 本位 is a linguistic concept. It cannot be applied to language pedagogy. Secondly, as mentioned above, 詞本位 is ill-motivated, and 字本位 is also ill-motivated. Thirdly, Bellassen could have reframed his approach entirely and made his proposal quite sound. In other words, he

could have used the framework of 'components' of L2 Chinese pedagogy, instead of 本位. The foundation of the colloquial/oral language is 'word', while the foundation of the writing system is 'character 字'. An approach like this will be perfectly acceptable to the field of L2 Chinese.

Our concern in this section is not so much 詞本位 or 字本位 as the inclination underlying these and other approaches frequently observed in the field of Chinese linguistics as well as in the field of L2 Chinese. Our underlying inclination is to highlight what seems peculiar or specific to our own language and ignore universal principles. A classic example is the creation of 語素, adopted universally in mainland China. It seems to be related to morpheme 詞素 but there have not been clear-cut definitions of it.

The category of morpheme has existed for decades in linguistics and been light-heartedly discarded in Chinese linguistics and L2 Chinese. Look at the category compound words 複合詞. A combination of, usually, two Chinese characters is defined as a compound, excluding a small number of the so-called suffixes or prefixes in modern Chinese (邵敬敏, 2007). The category compound word has existed for decades and has its own perfectly functional definitions, which have been ignored and discarded. Now, as has been illustrated above, we have 字本位 and 詞本位. It's time we return to the universal stage of linguistics and language pedagogy.

5. Issue #4: Chinese is a Difficult Language.

The concept of 'difficult language' has always accompanied language pedagogy, but not in linguistics. This is especially true of Chinese. It has consistently been named as one of the most difficult languages to acquire. The concept probably began with Foreign Language Institute (FSI)'s scale of language difficulty, with the most difficult group as given below as an illustration of this concept. The UN also has an elaborate system of presenting the scale of difficulty, 2018, based on the FSI scale.

Table 1

Category V: 88 weeks (2200 hours) Languages which are exceptionally difficult for native English speakers	
Arabic Cantonese (Chinese) Mandarin (Chinese)	* Japanese Korean

This is a difficult concept for subsequent reasons, which will relate specifically to Chinese. Firstly, when we say that Chinese is a difficult language, we are presenting the language as a unibody. For Chinese, the language can be broken down into the modules of, using linguistic terms, segmental phonetics, suprasegmental phonetics (tones, stress, intonation), morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and logograph. The last-mentioned component applies to Japanese and Chinese only. We are not rejecting the notion of difficulty, but each of these components must be highlighted. Heretofore, we have not seen any instance of this approach, nor do we know exactly how to measure the scale of difficulty for each module of the language. In phonetics, for example, Chinese has a relatively simple system of vowels, except for the front high rounded /ü/. A significant number of beginning students of Chinese in the US have trouble with this vowel. Can we conclude that /ü/ is a difficult vowel? How do we quantify 'significant'? 40%, 60% or 80%? Furthermore, can we conclude from this vowel that Chinese is a difficult language? Do the retroflexive consonants in Chinese make the language difficult? Do the tones in Chinese make it a difficult language? Similar questions can be raised in terms of Chinese morphology, Chinese syntax, etc. A linguistic feature may entail learning difficulty, but it does not follow that the language at issue is a difficult language. These are separate matters. These and similar observations should make it clear that a sweeping statement such as 'Chinese is a difficult language' oversimplifies the matter.

Secondly, though scripts are usually not included in linguistic discussions, the written Chinese script, usually referred to as Chinese characters, is an important component of L2 Chinese. It is one of a handful of non-alphabet and living scripts

globally. 1. And while it's difficult to apply the concept of difficulty to linguistic features such as phonetics and syntax, it seems relatively easier to do so to scripts. The following statements seem to comply with common sense. 1. Alphabets are easier to learn than non-alphabet scripts. 2. Alphabet-letters (segmental letters) are easier to learn than syllabic scripts. 3. Logographs are harder to learn than non-logographic scripts, i.e. alphabets and syllabaries. 4. Logographic systems with more complex strokes are harder to learn than those with fewer strokes, i.e. Chinese traditional vs. simplified characters. In sum, traditional Chinese characters, as used in Taiwan, Hong Kong and (partly) Japan are the hardest scripts to learn in the world. However, following our observations and arguments above, a difficult script does not automatically make a whole language difficult to learn.

Thirdly, whereas statements like 'Chinese is a difficult language' or 'Chinese grammar is hard' are static, learning a language is a dynamic process, in the sense that there are numerous personal and non-personal factors underlying learning and acquiring. To take a straightforward case, classifiers in modern Chinese, labeled as measures in L2 Chinese, have been known as stumbling blocks for students/learners in the US. But for Thai-speaking students, Chinese classifiers are as easy as ABC, since Thai has an extensive system of classifiers of their own. When learning Chinese, a Thai student needs only to know $a=x$, $b=y$, etc. E the statement 'Chinese classifiers are difficult' is false. To make a statement true, we must state that Chinese classifiers are difficult to learn for English-speaking students/learners. There's a qualifier in the statement. Approaches like this have long been practiced at FSI, see the 'difficulty' chart above. The role of a learner's native language must be highlighted in the process of learning a language.

6. Issue #5: Hanyu Pinyin is the most accurate phoneticization of Chinese.

This pronouncement on Pinyin is echoed equally loudly in Taiwan by 'Bpmf is the most accurate phoneticization of Chinese'. Regarding such statements, we can make the following observations. First, both Hanyu Pinyin (HyPy) and Bpmf were created and promoted by the respective governments. Thus there's an element of patriotism underlying making such statements. Politics and language policies always go hand in

hand. Secondly, HyPy and Bpmf are both created to aid literacy among young citizens. They are tools for L1 learners, who are with almost full verbal proficiency. Such tools have been transported directly into the L2 Chinese field, without appropriateness studies, when there were numerous other candidates. Not many years ago in Taiwan, some adult L2 learners were using L1 textbooks intended for 7-year-olds! One most comfortably and competently teaches what one has grown up learning with.

Linguistically, we assume, with de Saussure (1916), that symbols are merely arbitrary, and one symbol cannot in theory represent a signified more accurately. Nonetheless, how such symbols are put together can be very different, i.e. there are different designs, motivations, underlying various phonetic-representation systems of Chinese. The Wade-Giles system stays close to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) conventions. The Bpmf employs traditional fanqie 反切 principles plus simple components of Chinese characters. The Guoyu Luomazi (GL), i.e. Bpmf-2, builds tones into spelling. The Yale system utilizes the common spelling-conventions and tendencies in English orthography. The HyPy makes use of some letters complete with phonetic values in the Russian alphabet. 周有光 (1952) is relevant to our discussion here.

In light of the discussions above, it's now possible to interpret why native-speaker instructors of L2 Chinese in Taiwan feel strongly that Bpmf is the most accurate phoneticization system. It has to do with the transfer theory in language acquisition (Lennon 2008). In Romanization, Roman letters are naturally used in most if not all non-logographic languages. When that is the case, Romanization letters have phonetic values of their own in those languages. Such phonetic values are transferred in L2 Chinese experience. The transferred values can be of any kind depending on the native languages of L2 Chinese learners. The so-called notorious symbols in HyPy, viz. j, q, x, zh, and c, only because they have their own distinctive phonetic values in learners' native languages. In this case, these symbols are felt especially by English-speaking learners to carry 'unusual' sounds, as such letters carry very different phonetic values, if found in English. If not found in English, they have very strange phonetic values. This is typical of cross-script interference. The letter /x/ sounds perfect for Mexican learners, and /zh/ sounds perfect, almost, for Russian learners. Etc.

Why is Bpmf felt to be the most accurate system? Simply because the transfer theory is invalid in this case, as the symbols are not used by any other languages. Bpmf

has clean values, so to speak, without any possible transfer interference. That is all there is to it. This is the semiotic side of Bpmf. From the pragmatic perspective, Taiwan is the only place in the whole world where Bpmf is used. L2 learners' knowledge of or proficiency in this system will not aid career prospects very much unless one intends to reside permanently in Taiwan. Furthermore, even within Taiwan itself, one is not going to encounter Bpmf very much or at all. Taiwan nationals do not employ Bpmf in real life, except when inputting. Even road signs are given in characters and HyPy only, the former for natives and the latter foreigners. These observations should make one wonder why Bpmf is used at all in L2 Chinese in Taiwan.

7. Conclusion

This paper deals with some issues in the field of L2 Chinese worldwide. Issues are to be dealt with and resolved, as opposed to myths, which are misconceptions that do not necessarily have to be resolved, e.g. the Chinese script is ideographic. They overlap at times, depending on attitudes. Some other statements are merely meaningless, e.g. the Chinese language has the largest number of speakers in the world. It is sincerely hoped that some of the issues raised herein would get responded to by people concerned with the welfare of the field of teaching Chinese as a second/foreign language.

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對外華語的若干問題

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摘要

在本文中，我們著眼於與作為第二語言 / 外語（對外漢語）教學的學科相關的一些重要議題。有些議題與台灣本地有關，而另一些則關係於全球。這些問題表明該學科還沒有達到足夠的嚴謹性，需要再進一步探討和解決。對外漢語的三個組成部分，即語言學、心理語言學和教育。對外漢語教學法是台灣乃至全球發展得最不令我們滿意的領域。本文亦將廣泛探討對外漢語領域的中文名稱問題，但沒有一個簡單而完整的解決方案。漢字在語言學和應用語言學上的地位近來在我們領域引起了很多討論，有人認為它在語言學上是一個有爭議的問題，在其教學法上，它只是二語漢語的組成部分之一。漢語被普遍認為是一門難學的語言的問題將在本文中重新審視。最後，這裡將從符號學上探討漢語拼音的基本屬性。

關鍵詞：對外漢語、二語漢語、二語教學作為一門學科、漢字、語言難度、拼音