

Going Global

How Chinese language teachers are adapting on the world stage



Learning Chinese as a foreign language is nothing new. As far back as the 16th century records show Westerners studying to improve their understanding of the main languages of China.

But with today's globally-connected world, plus the growth of China in the world economy, the recent take up of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) has soared.

Today 50 million non-native speakers study Chinese each year, making it one of the fastest-growing international languages in the world. According to the influential Xinhua News Agency, 750,000 people took the Chinese Proficiency Test in 2012, compared to 118,000 in 2005.

In the US, there was a reported 200% increase in the take up of CFL between 2005 and 2009. In Singapore, one response to the economic downturn was to provide subsidies for Singaporeans to learn Chinese.

Meanwhile, Dmitry Medvedev designated 2010 as the "Year of Chinese Language" when he was still President of Russia and even flirted with the idea of learning it himself.

Time to become international

The rise in the popularity of learning Chinese means there are now an estimated 60,000 CFL teachers operating around the world. Looking at the trends, this figure is only set to proliferate in the years to come.

That's obviously good news for teachers whose careers look secure in an expanding market. But with growth comes the question of how to develop the way Chinese is taught in

educational settings that require different approaches to teaching and learning.

Hui Xu at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln looks at this topic in detail in [her research into the challenges native Chinese teachers experience](#) working in K-12 classrooms across the US:

"They face a wide range of challenges teaching in a context extremely different from the culture and educational system in their country of origin" she says, listing pedagogy, classroom management and teacher-student relationships as just a few of the many examples of how native Chinese teachers need to adapt.

Interact differently

"Researchers assert that in order for eastern teachers to interact effectively with their students," she adds, "they must confront their own biases, learn about their students' cultures, different learning styles and perceive the world through diverse cultural lenses."

One teacher interviewed as part of Hui Xu's research puts it like this:

"I did spend lots of time thinking of instructional activities when I was in Taiwan teaching, but the activities did not necessarily need to be very interesting or entertaining. But teaching my students here in the US, I feel it is important to entertain your students through your instructional activities and create interest in what you are teaching."

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Even in adult learning contexts, where classroom management is often less of an issue, CFL teachers still have to address why their students are learning Chinese and what this means for the way it is taught.

In a country that saw CFL learning almost double between 2010 and 2011, Chen Jiaying, Director of Brazil's Confucius Institute, remarked on a significant change in motivation:

"At first I thought people studied Chinese mainly out of curiosity, but now I believe that as relations between Brazil and China have become more and more significant in recent years, more Brazilians are interested in the Chinese language. They are diplomats, businessmen, university students willing to learn Mandarin to work with China."

"We are trying to create real-life situations where students need to communicate in Chinese"

Growth in popularity is to be welcomed, but there are various reasons why any Chinese language teacher entering the global market for the first time would be forgiven for feeling uncertain about what they are taking on.

As Julian Linnell points out in his book, *The Chinese way of teaching*, Chinese teachers face the formidable task of shifting their teacher-oriented approaches, which greatly emphasize teaching vocabulary and grammar, into student-centered learning involving students in cooperative activities using the language.

But the fact is these teachers don't have to depart from what they learned at home to the extent that is often argued.

As Shaoyan Qi, author of *Discover China*, one of the first Chinese language series developed for the international market, explains:

A more communicative approach

"The expected role of the teacher and the emphasis on language learning are two areas where native-speakers teaching Chinese around the world often need to adapt. But this is no different to the way international teachers of any other language need to fit into their local environment."

"Following a more communicative approach - which the majority of educational systems around the world now expect - may require some rethinking. But the aim is still the same: to give students the language they need and the skills to use it in situations that reflect real life."

For Dede Wilson, a teacher trainer with many years' experience working with native teachers in China and around the world, the reason why so many people want to learn Chinese as a foreign language should be their main priority when they enter international classrooms:

"Yes, Chinese used to be for enthusiasts in the Western world. But with 50 million students, it's clear that a new group of learners now exists."

Focus on speaking skills

"The best information shows these are people who want to do business with or study in China. In other words, they need greater emphasis on speaking, listening and reading skills in addition to important language development and the focus on writing skills."

How this translates into actual classroom activity might be new for some Chinese language teachers but are already common practice for teachers of other languages.

Pair work activities are one example where teachers step back to give their students the time to see how they perform on their own. It's an approach where teachers need to let go and allow their students time to try out newly-learned language (and feel free to make mistakes along the way).

Real-life situations

This certainly introduces situations where the teacher transfers control to her students, but Shaoyan Qi explains the reason:

"We are trying to create real-life situations where students need to communicate in Chinese outside the classroom."

"This is challenging because we are creating situations in class where the teacher is not there to help them. Of course, any major mistakes are corrected when the free activities end."

Looking ahead, it's clear that publishers and teachers of Chinese as a Foreign Language are the people to watch. For a start, they have an exciting future ahead of them in the way the ELT profession established itself through the likes of *Headway* and International House in the mid-80s.

Already, the way they export their language to the world will be interesting to compare to the experience of English, forty years ago.

Now is the time to see how the world's next major language evolves in the international arena. ■