

CLTeacher: Teachers in the Spotlight

Dr. Theresa Munford, St. Gregory's School Bath

Dr. Theresa Munford has been teaching Chinese as a foreign language for over 10 years in various schools – both to teenagers and adults. Currently she works at St. Gregory's School in Bath, a mixed comprehensive in the South West of England.

Her students are mainly between the ages of 14 and 18 – and all of them choose to study Chinese. For Theresa this makes the job very satisfying, and many of them are just as fascinated by Chinese language and culture as she was in her early days of study. She says, 'it's a thrill to see students progressing and enjoying lessons that have worked well. And, even more so when you are teaching students who have found it difficult or even uninteresting to study other European languages, but who suddenly find that Chinese is a language they like.' Theresa believes it's important to show students that Chinese is accessible to everyone, and to tap into the things that make it different in a positive way. She says, 'some students find it exciting to encounter a completely different script – it can be like code-breaking and for students who struggle with spelling in English, or possibly the spelling of another European language like French, the regularity of pinyin can actually be a relief and something that gives them confidence.' She also points out that students can get a natural boost from learning a language that many other people don't learn, and that it's nice for them to realise they know things their parents don't know - like how to read a menu in a Chinese restaurant.

Theresa's main areas of interest in CLT revolve around literacy and the development of reading skills. She has also taught many students with dyslexia, and has over the years developed ways to support these learners successfully. Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling, and it affects people with varying levels of intellectual ability. But as Theresa points out, dyslexia isn't just about reading and spelling – behind this is difficulty with the speed of processing phonemes which has an effect on verbal memory. She says, 'dyslexics need support with the amount of memory work that Chinese requires to help avoid overload – for example, the use of timers to set work for certain periods of time. This 'chunks' their learning down into manageable units.'

Theresa also draws on her own experience of learning Chinese to assure all of her students that they will eventually make progress. In her early studies, she struggled with tones and says, 'I am neither musical, nor a good auditory learner, so the tones didn't come easy to me. I had to work at it, listening over and over from recordings of vocabulary lists and writing down the correct tones until I finally got them right. If you can't 'hear' them, you can't produce them accurately so this sort of practice is necessary. I recall a kind of light going on in my head once I started to hear them properly. It's this sort of personal experience that helps me encourage my students.'

Theresa has a lot of experience teaching school-aged learners, and one of the most challenging aspects of working with this age group is getting them to develop good homework habits early on. She notes 'some school subjects can be 'crammed' the night before an exam, but languages simply can't.' Because of this, it's essential to remind students that they need to keep at it consistently, and when they do, they make progress and build their confidence.

Chinese, although growing in popularity, still remains one of the lesser taught languages in many school curriculums. This poses some challenges for new teachers as there are fewer outlets for training and development, and fewer Chinese-specific resources. Theresa would encourage new teachers to observe their peers and teachers of other languages to pick up lesson and activity ideas that can be easily adapted to Chinese. She notes that associations like ALL (Association for Language Learning) offer regular opportunities to be involved in a wider language teaching community. For resources, she recommends the TES (Times Educational Supplement) website which has a great bank of activities for languages, including Mandarin, and languagesresources.co.uk which although is for European languages, offers downloadable PowerPoints that can be easily tweaked for teaching Chinese.

Theresa feels that the biggest challenge for the entire Chinese teaching industry is breaking down the false belief that Chinese is too difficult to learn. She says, 'there are still people out there who label Chinese as too difficult or too different for non-Chinese to bother with. We have to keep getting the message across that in terms of grammar, Chinese is actually a very straight-forward and logical language.' She also points out that in the past people viewed the complex writing system as the main obstacle, but of course as technology moves ahead, the way in which teachers approach

writing has changed considerably. She says from her own experience, 'If you are teaching for national exams like GCSE or Pre-U, your students need to do quite a bit of handwriting. But students need to recognise that the most important element of this is to be literate, and that once they are using Chinese in real life situations, they can be literate by just inputting on computers and phones – the key is to be able to read fluently.'

Macmillan Education would like to thank Dr. Theresa Munford for her input into this issue of CLTalk, and for being our 'Teacher in the Spotlight.' You can download Theresa's activity **Seven Step Listening** also in this issue at: <http://www.mydiscoverchina.com/cltalk-issue-14/>

*Dr. Munford will also be conducting workshops on teaching literacy on behalf of Macmillan Education in the coming months, so watch our **events page** to learn more.*