Title	Needs of Chinese language teachers in cultivating students' thinking skills
Author(s)	Wong Yin Mei and Hsu, Jing-Fong Jackie
Source	*ERA Conference, Singapore, 23-25 November 1998*
Organised by	Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERAS)

Needs of Chinese language teachers in cultivating students' thinking skills

Wong Yin Mei
River Valley Primary School
&
Hsu, Jing-Fong Jackie
NIE/Nanyang Technological University

Introduction

In June 1997, Mr Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister of Singapore, announced that all schools should focus their effort on developing future generations of thinking and committed citizens. He also mentioned that the Ministry of Education is undertaking a fundamental review of its curriculum and assessment system to execute the concept (Goh, 1997). The job of incorporating thinking skills into each subject will probably fall onto the 20,000 teachers currently teaching in schools.

With rapid urbanisation, the younger generation of Chinese Singaporeans is loosing much of their cultural heritage. The survival of Chinese language and culture will not depend on forcing students with mere knowledge on traditions and customs. The Chinese language will have to be practical as a form of communication in the modern world in order to stay 'alive'. Therefore, the teaching of Chinese will have to change along with all other subjects in schools. Thinking activity is a more effective way of helping students master Chinese language as it engages the students in associating, applying, making meaning of the knowledge they learned.

There are no official units or committees sets up for the development of Chinese language. Yet thinking skills in Chinese language needs to be taught and students are required to master eight basic thinking skills (with exception of only the EM3 classes) by the time they leave school. Lack of support from government and the community may undermine the Chinese language teachers' efforts in teaching the students thinking skills. This study aims to address the immediate needs and readiness of primary schools Chinese language teachers in the area of cultivating students' thinking skills.

Based on the above aim, the principal research questions are derived as follows:

1) How ready are the primary Chinese language teachers in cultivating students' thinking skills?

2) What type of help and support can the government provide for the Chinese language teachers in cultivating students' thinking skills?

Teaching Thinking Skill in the Chinese Language Classroom

The thinking skill movement of the 80's produced special programs and emphasized instructional methods to foster thinking. They emphasized more on the explicit teaching of thinking which would give greater impact to students, and more classroom instruction with an atmosphere of thoughtfulness which would open to students for valuing good thinking. Most important, they stressed on integrating thinking into content instruction which would allow students to think about what they are learning. (Swartz, 1994)

These principles provide the basis rationale for infusing critical and creative thinking into content instruction. It is also essential to teach students to use information and concepts that they learn in school to make decision and solving problem effectively. Teaching for thinking employing methods to promote students' deep understanding of the content. Such methods include using co-operative learning, graphic organizers, higher order questioning, Socratic dialog, manipulatives, and inquiry learning.

In 1993, the inculcation of independent thinking ability of student was one of the objectives in the Chinese Language Syllabus (CDIS, 1993) after adopting proposal raised by Mr. Ong Teng Cheong (Ong, 1992). However, literature review has reflected that till this date, little or no systematic study into incorporating thinking skills into Chinese language teaching was done. Although lacking of research studies in this area, many Chinese experts (Lin, 1997; Soh, 1997) suggest ways of incorporating thinking skills developed by the Western countries into Chinese language learning. There are also a few commentary articles on this topic:

Lin Shi (1997) pointed out that the average classroom teaching overemphasized knowledge and facts rather than thinking. He referred to thinking as the process of absorbing and applying knowledge to solve everyday problems. For certain subjects, like Chinese language, there is enough knowledge base in the subject to handle most problems in that area. As a result, the subject itself shuts out the need to think. That leads to a situation where knowledge and facts replace individual thinking in the role of education. However, in the ever-changing society of today, knowledge and facts becomes obsolete very quickly. Thinking skills needs to be taught to the students so that they can survive in the society of tomorrow. Lin Shi (1997) recommended Chinese language teachers to infuse thinking skills into their teaching. The teacher may introduce thinking skills in order of its difficulty, i.e. from lower order thinking skills progressing to higher order thinking skills. The teacher may make use of the materials from current textbooks, workbooks etc. The teacher should decide on the level of thinking skills according to the ability of the students, not the textbook materials. In doing so, Lin Shi (1997) believes that students can see Chinese language as a practical subject and a useful mean of communication. Because Chinese language is actively being used in the practical world by Chinese students to solve modern day's life problems within their social circle, family and friendship. This should also help to improve the students' command of Chinese language. Another expert, Dr Soh Kay Cheng, advocates a 'balanced approach' in teaching. He believes that 'free expression' must be balanced with 'building of foundation'. In fact, he believes that these two are interactive and are important in the children's overall development in thinking (Soh, 1997).

Methodology

Subjects. There were ten primary schools and a total of one hundred and fifteen Chinese language teachers took part in this research.

Instruments. Interview and questionnaire were selected as the instruments used in this study. The interview with officers from the Ministry of Education, Chinese language and cultural experts is to shape the types of questions to be included in the questionnaire from a panoramic view; to understand the time frame, possible changes in the assessment system, content, impact on Chinese language learning etc. The sample for the interview consists of representative from five different arenas: Chinese language and cultural experts, thinking skills experts, officers from the Ministry of Education (Curriculum Planning & Development Division), lecturers from the National Institution of Education, and principals of schools. For example, Mr Lee Ngian Kai (Vice Principal of Rulang Primary School) and Dr Soh Kay Cheng (Lecturer from National Institution of Education/Expert in Thinking Skills).

Through the questionnaire, we would like to get information on how ready are Chinese language teachers in cultivating students' thinking skills and how would they like the government to help them. There were total thirty-six questions in this questionnaire. The questions included the following components: Personal Particulars (ten questions), Attitude (fifteen questions), Knowledge (six questions), Skills (four questions), Difficulties and how the government can help (two questions).

Results and Discussion

Research question one: How ready are the primary Chinese language teachers in cultivating students' thinking skills?

We have measured three components to ascertain the readiness of Chinese language teachers in cultivating students' thinking skills: Attitude, Knowledge, and Skills.

In terms of attitude, most of the teachers are ready to carry out teaching of thinking skills. Over half of the sample (fifty-three percent) expressed that they are willing to carry out teaching of thinking skills to their students within one-month notice from the government. The rest of the sample (forty-seven percent) indicated that they would feel stressed if the government required them to do so. The result from the questionnaire has also revealed the fact that eighty-four percent of teachers are convinced that thinking skills are important to the students' overall development as compared to sixteen percent who do not agree to this statement. Fifty-four percent of the teachers feel that this would increase the students' workload as compared to forty-six percent who feel that learning thinking skills would not add on to their study-load. Results show that most of the Chinese language teachers have positive attitude toward infusing thinking skills into Chinese language lessons.

In terms of knowledge, a test adopted from Lin Shi (1997) article was administered to the teachers. This test consisted of different types of thinking skills questions and the teachers were asked to identify them. The teachers did badly in this section, indicating that they did not have enough knowledge in this area to be ready for the teaching of thinking skills. Only sixteen percent of all teachers managed to identify the types of questions correctly. From this result, we conclude that majority of the teachers are not capable to identify different types of thinking as all the teachers are responsible for setting questions for assessment papers.

In terms of skills, eighty-eight percent of the teachers indicated that they do not know enough about thinking skills to meet requirements in cultivating students' thinking skills.

Research question two: what type of help and support can the government provide for the Chinese language teachers in cultivating students' thinking skills?

Most of teachers suggest that the government may help them in the following areas:

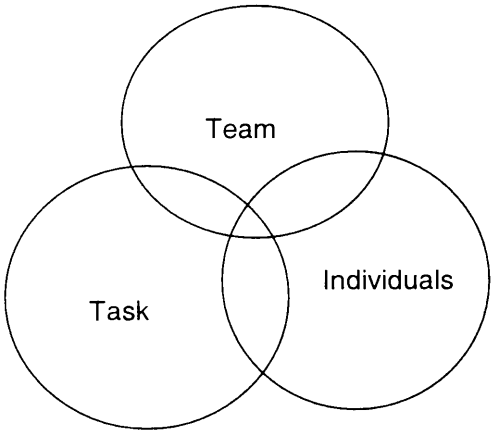
- To produce videotapes of exemplary teachers while they are teaching thinking skills for other teachers to model after.
- To increase the number of Chinese lessons so that the teachers can complete the prescribe syllabus while putting in thinking skills training.
- Send experts to schools to conduct training and seminars for teachers (in Chinese).

- Improve the current teaching materials.
- To provide teachers' guide which specifically instruct teachers on how to teach thinking skills, define the goals and objectives of the thinking skills to the taught.
- Reduce the existing class-size of forty or fifty students per class to twenty or thirty students per class.
- Reduce teaching load so that teachers may have more time to develop teaching materials themselves.
- Cut down on curriculum content.
- Engage experts to schools to teach the students directly.

Summary and Recommendations

The empirical research has concluded that the teachers are not ready to start teaching thinking skills, especially in the area of knowledge and skills. They wish to receive support from the government.

We recommend that the government may consider using the following Adair's (1988) model to ensure success in the initiative "thinking schools and a learning nation". Adair (1988) identified three functional areas of management, and developed them diagrammatically as below to indicate that they are interlinked, and must be kept in balance:



In the implementation of this new direction, the greatest help the government can provide is to ensure that the balance of these three components. We recommend the government may consider adopting the following strategies:

1. On the task level, the government should identify their objectives, check their resources in achieving this task. Through the interview, we has identified other sources of resources which the government can tap on:

- To join force with the Chinese Language Teachers' Union
- Strengthen ties with the National Institute of Education
- Tap on the resources of other nations, which have also done research on thinking skills.

2. On the team level, the government should set up a proper committee to look into the teaching of thinking skills in Chinese language. Although there is a committee in the Curriculum Planning and Development Division, the small group of people in the committee is also in-charge of many different activities including implementing IT, National education etc. All the above activities requires lots of expertise and effort, and the people may not be able to manage all these activities well at the same time.

3. On the individual level, the government should provide good training programmes for the Chinese language teachers, because result has shown that teachers lack knowledge and skills to carry out this initiative. The design of training programmes may include 'managing change', and include contents which help teachers to see the political side of why instilling thinking skills is important. Teachers want assurance that thinking skills is nothing fanciful, but a more systematic way to develop students' thinking skills. In the area of teaching, practical examples should be the main components of the training programmes. Empirical study has revealed that majority of the current Chinese teachers are already matured workers. Ministry may take into consideration the ability of matured-age teachers, as many of them are not so young.

References

Adair, J.E. (1988). Effective Leadership. London: Pan Books

CDIS (1993). Chinese Language Syllabus. Singapore: CDIS, Ministry of Education.

Goh, C.T. (1997). Shaping our future: Thinking schools and a learning nation. Prime Minster's speech at the opening of the 7th International Conference on Thinking (June 2), *speeches*, 21(3), 12-20.

Lin S. (1997). Zhong si kao de hua wen jiao xue. *Creative Thinking and Information Technology Series 1*. Singapore: SNP Publishing Pte Ltd.

Ong, T.C. (1992). Chinese Language Teaching and Learning in Singapore. Singapore: Chinese Language Review Committee, Ministry of Education.

Soh, K.C. (1997). Creativity: Some Thoughts and A Few Questions (Abridgement). Singapore: NIE Centre for Educational Research.

Swartz, R.J. & Parks, S. (1994). *Infusing the Teaching of Critical and Creative Thinking into Content Instruction*. U.S.A: Critical Midwest Publications.