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Diagnostic approach to the teaching of Chinese
in Mission secondary schools

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Diagnostic Approach to the Teaching of Chinese in Mission Secondary Schools

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There are many ways of teaching a language but none is the way with guaranteed success. Research has been very active in linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and even neurolinguistics. They, however, do not seem to be able to offer specific help to language teachers who are faced with a plethora of problems and difficulties. While the panacea is no where in sight, language teachers will have to rely on themselves for solutions to their day-to-day problems; this might be attained through objective exploration, careful hypothesizing, bold experimentation, and conscientious verification.

Today, I am privileged with this opportunity to share with you some thoughts on the teaching of Chinese Language in mission secondary schools. I do not pretend to know the answers but just would like to take, together with you, an objective look at the sources of problems. We might be able to find a path which makes our trip easier, if not a highway to the success of teaching Chinese language.

The Learning Environment

Effective teaching of any language is governed by a host of conditions, including the objectives, pupils, materials, instruction, and the learning environment. It is a truism that the objectives, materials, and pupils are to a large degree 'given' and hence are to be accepted since not much choice is left, but instruction is almost entirely in the teacher's hand and much can be done about it.

Objectives. For the present time, it would be wise to place the emphasis on the teaching of reading comprehension. For most pupils learning Chinese Language, listening and speaking are no problems at all though they always have difficulty in reading and writing. Although the ability to write is the highest achievement, this is not the ultimate goal for most people learning a language. Moreover, the ability to write well depends to a large extent on the ability to read with understanding and the possession of declarative knowledge of the topic to write. These cannot be attained within a short time span. It is then logical to build on the pupils' well-developed ability in listening and speaking and develop their ability to read. This also serves as a bridge to writing.

Another reason for emphasizing the teaching of reading is that pupils have a better chance of experiencing feeling of achievement in learning to read than in learning to write.

Moreover, the pupils will be able to gain some knowledge of the Chinese culture through reading; this is consistent with the goal of teaching Chinese Language in our schools. Yet another reason for the emphasis on reading is that the assessment of reading is much more objective and hence more reliable and valid than of other language skills, thus providing a more realistic understanding of the pupils' attainment and problems. Hence, as seen from different viewpoints, the teaching of reading ought to be the focus of Chinese Language teaching in the secondary schools.

Pupils. Your pupils are by an large from middle and upper income families. It is well known that parents of these socioeconomic backgrounds have more years of formal education, place greater value on education and see education as a form of investment. These are advantageous to the children's schooling. Children from such families tend to be more intelligent, have stronger achievement motivation. These are also to their advantage. Nonetheless, such family and personal resources do not by themselves guarantee effective language learning because it needs adequate motivation to learn the language and ample opportunity to practise it. The two latter conditions do not seem to be found among your pupils. Moreover, Chinese is a relatively difficult language and there is a lack of opportunity to practise.

That being so, it is no surprise that the Chinese Language achievement is below expectation and that pupils find it frustrating. As for the parents, other than engaging private tutors to help, there is not much they can do. This may lead to discontent and intentional or unintentional hint that learning Chinese Language is not necessary. These may also reinforce the pupils feelings of frustration, dislike, and anxiety. In short, the experience and situation lead to 'negative affective filter' affecting the pupils' attitude towards Chinese Language.

Overseas research shows two kinds of language motivation. The first, instrumental motivation is one with which a person learns a language to enhance the chances of passing examination and furthering education or career. Instrumental motivation seems to lead to better performance in written examination. Secondly, integrative motivation is one with which a person learns a language so that he can communicate with members of the language community and become familiar with its culture. This latter kind of language motivation seems to go with better oral proficiency and knowledge of the culture.

Looking at the local scene, both kinds of language motivation exists, but their effects on the learning of Chinese Language remain an area to be researched on. Although instrumental motivation has been emphatically stressed in our schools, the desired effect does not seem to obtain in your schools. This serve to show that research done overseas may not be applicable to local situation and we need to do our own

research in the hope of finding solutions to our problems.

Instruction. The first problem Chinese Language teachers face is the lack of suitable tests that will help them diagnose objectively and accurately the learning difficulties of their pupils. Although the achievement tests teachers usually use for assessment may give some ideas, but the information is not specific enough to suggest any specific corrective actions. As the old saying Chinese goes, "To do a good job, you need first to sharpen your instruments". The construction of diagnostic tests seems to be an urgent task.

There are two processes by which languages are learned. In language acquisition, a person immerses totally in a language environment and 'picks up' the language through constant and continuous exposure to and use of it in social transactions. This, in fact, is the 'mother tongue' or first language way of language learning. Children who find themselves in this situation cannot escape from it and cannot help learning the language. Actively or passively, they will learn it and with immediate psychological or physiological satisfaction, too.

The other process, language learning, takes place in a contrived situation (classroom or language lab) through formal instruction, practice, and correction. This is the way a second or foreign language is learned. Pupils in this situation can 'escape' mentally or switch off. Even if they learn at all, the satisfaction is more likely of a psychological nature (eg praise by the teacher, admiration of peers) and is not often immediate (eg test results come several days after the language behaviour was demonstrated). The approach commonly used by Chinese Language teachers seems to be more akin to language acquisition, but in an environment not supportive of this form of language development.

Moreover, Chinese Language is but one of many subjects the pupils learn. The ways pupils are taught in other subjects will lead them to expect a similar approach in their Chinese Language classes and such expectation will affect their attitude toward the subject, the teacher and, of course, the achievement. Nonetheless, as tradition dies hard, the teaching of Chinese Language is still to a large extent teacher-centered. Under such a condition, a vicious circle exists between instruction, teacher-pupil relationship and pupil performance. How to break this vicious circle is another topic for discussion. The key question then is whether Chinese Language teachers are prepared to change instructional approach in an environment which has already changed tremendously.

Four Principles

As discussed above, factors contributing to the poorer performance in Chinese Language among pupils in mission secondary schools are many and varied and are interacting in a complex manner. Four principles may be derived from the analysis which may help to improve the situation.

Work on the pupils' affective filter. If the emphasis on instrumental motivation in the past has not been successful, more of the same thing does not mean better. Further exaltation may even make things worse as this is likely to accentuate the already existing disagreement or negative attitude. As the well-known overturned U-curve of motivational psychology suggests, it is the optimal and not the maximal motivation that helps. We ought to keep the instrumental motivation but maintain it at a suitable level without overemphasizing it. At the same time, more attention needs to be given to integrative motivation so that the pupils learn Chinese Language with group support, find pleasure in learning it, and gain a sense of achievement in doing so.

Cultural activities carried out with Chinese Language will provide a purpose of learning the language and the much needed opportunity of putting it into good use. Group support and enjoyment in such activities will further strengthen their wish to learn the language. In the long run, such incidental learning is a form of immersion for language acquisition supported by relaxed and pleasant feelings. Activities such as songs contest, cultural dance, drama, recital of poems, painting and calligraphy display are worth considering.

To maximize the effect of such cultural activities as a means of improving pupil learning of Chinese Language, the possibility of parental involvement needs to be explored, for the simple reason that parental attitude towards the language affects pupil attitude to it and hence achievement in it. When parents and their children both feel helpless and hopeless, giving up is a natural reaction and resentment is a worse one. Through parents' seminars and forums, it might be possible to induce a more positive attitude among the parents. It may even be worth considering to teach the parents the language, albeit at an elementary level. People tend to dislike what they cannot do or do not understand. Building up the parents' confidence in the language and in their children's ability to learn it deserves our attention. Involvement of parents in cultural activities gives them the opportunity to come into direct contact with the language and may bring about better understanding and more positive attitude. Parents are usually disinterested audience but they are always willing to put in efforts or at least show tolerance for the sake of their children. This is a force not to be neglected in the attempt in improving Chinese Language learning in your schools.

Be specific and ensure accumulation. Language cannot be

attained in one day; language achievement can only be seen after a long period of accumulation. This is one of the reasons pupils find language learning frustrating, because it is difficult for them to find themselves making perceivable progress. It is therefore important for Chinese Language teachers to provide pupils with reassuring feedback constantly; it is desirable that pupils are shown how much they have learned by the end of almost every language lesson. This can be done by asking a few oral questions or having pupils complete a simple quiz based on what was taught during a lesson. This further implies that the teacher needs to be clear and specific in the lesson objectives.

Regular revision provides the opportunity for the pupils to use what they have learned and apply it in different contexts. This decontextualization will enable the pupils to use the language in contexts other than that in which it was learned originally. To make exercises more interesting and to enable association, language games such as word puzzles and crosswords can be used. Pupils can also be guided to classify new words, link old and new words by radicals, pronunciation, meanings; such activities will strengthen pupil ability to pick up relevant linguistic cues which help recall.

Pupils should be actively involved. People learn what they do. Pupils who sit and listen through out the lesson learn to sit and listen. If they are called upon to discriminate confusing words, they learn to discriminate. If the pupils are to learn to read and write Chinese, they must actively do these in the classroom and not just listening to someone (usually the teacher) reading or watching someone writing.

Experiments on level of processing have shown that activities involving the learner associating words with their meanings helped memory more than those involving associating words with their forms and sounds. Pupils will remember words better if they have to use them for making sentences, to fill in blanks, to compare with words of similar or different meanings. Such activities as classification and association of words provide the pupils with the much needed opportunity to use and practise what they have been taught; through deep processing, they build up concept maps in their minds.

Creative teachers will be able to come up with many such activities which involve the pupils actively in the learning process. Active involvement may take the form of paired learning, dramatization, re-writing the text, writing a play based on the text, riddles, class magazine, etc. These are activities (or 'exercises') which may be more challenging and hence interesting to the pupils.

Be adventurous in experimenting. As pointed out at the outset, research in the academic studies of language and language development has not been very helpful to language teachers and is not likely to be otherwise in the near future. Language teachers

will have to carry out their own research in search of more effective teaching. As a matter of fact, conscientious language teachers have been trying out different methods with the hope of improving pupils performance, without realizing that they have been experimenting.

Chinese Language teachers can consciously look for alternative methods of teaching the same topics. This can be achieved by systematically manipulating factors that might affect pupil performance and objectively record what happens. Some such factors are: the distribution of learning tasks, organization and presentation of materials to be learned, pupils' roles in the learning situation, and alternative methods of assessment. As a matter of fact, a group of experienced Chinese Language teachers attending the Advanced Certificate in Education (Chinese) programme at the Institute of Education carried out some classroom-based research projects with promising results. They looked into such problems as the effect of distributed and massed practice in learning Chinese characters; rote-learning word meanings; self-study before lessons; active and passive learning of vocabulary; group learning of vocabulary; and, sentence combination and sentence making.

Experiments such as these do not require much extra time and effort. All it needs is that the teacher teaches in a way different from what he is used to and make appropriate comparison to evaluate the effect. As a step beyond this, the use of some simple statistical techniques to check will not be difficult, too. When more teachers are able to share their experiences in the search for alternative methods of teaching through regular presentation of school-based projects, the likelihood of better pupil performance in Chinese Language examinations is enhanced.

Conclusion

From the diagnostic point of view, an effective Chinese Language lesson will have the following five characteristics:

1. Has well-defined objectives. Both the teacher and pupils have a clear idea of what language skills and knowledge are to be acquired by the end of each lesson.
2. Has content that is relevant to the pupils' experience. When the content of a Chinese Language lesson is relevant to the pupils' experience, they will find it easier to understand and hence more interesting and pleasant to learn and more likely to master.
3. Has ample pupil involvement. This not only makes the pupils feel that it is their business to learn but also provide more opportunity for practising the language. Through cultural activities and mutual support, the pupils are more likely to gain satisfaction in learning Chinese language.

4. Adequate evaluation and feedback. Let the pupil know how much they have learned and what are yet to be mastered. This will give them a sense of achievement and a clear direction; there will be less feelings of being lost and frustrated.

5. Has ample and varied practice and exercises. This ensures the pupils use the language skills and knowledge sufficiently and not being tied down by the texts used in the lessons. After all, people learn a language by using it in meaningful situations.

[This paper is based on a talk given on 8 Sep 89 at the Half-Day Workshop on CL2 Remedial Teaching for Secondary Schools, organized by the Chinese Unit, Curriculum Planning Division, Ministry of Education.]

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