

The Challenges of Creating a Chinese Program for Multi-Cultural Students

Here's a riddle: If a person who speaks two languages is bilingual, and one who speaks three languages is trilingual, what is someone called who speaks no foreign languages at all?

Answer: an American.

Sad but true, most American students are not required to learn a foreign language to graduate high school. Some schools require a minimum two year period of study in a foreign language to graduate; many students in these schools then pick the simplest Western language to learn, normally, Spanish.

Why U.S. Students Don't Place a Greater Importance on Foreign Language Study.

How can such an innovative country's students not recognize the importance of studying a foreign language? First, it's in our history. Let's face it, for two hundred years America was, first, breaking away from the British (who spoke English) and establishing itself as an independent nation. Second, most developed nations throughout the last hundred years, at least, used English as one of their primary languages to conduct trade, so U.S. students felt they did "not have to" learn other languages. Third, the U.S. is a big country; Europeans by necessity speak several languages, but, conveniently, our next closest trade neighbor is Canada, which is English [and French] speaking. Fourth, it's harder, and more expensive, for U.S. residents to travel to different countries, so most students aren't aware that a majority of the world's population speaks more than one language (in Europe and Asia, most speak several).

The above distinctions are primary reasons why, historically in the U.S., foreign language learning less of a priority and more of an "elite" perk for highly educated students. So, because of this, foreign language study was not a priority for most schools, and, for a long time students lucky enough to go on to higher education studied the "romance languages" such as French or Italian.

Lastly, we get what we ask for; if most U.S. parents value sports over language learning, then schools will put a higher priority on athletics and less of a priority on foreign language learning.

In addition, a recent Newsweek article (December 6, 2010 available at <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/12/06/not-much-progress-in-america-s-chinese-problem.html>) explains how, in response to (or because of) the above, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act placed a large emphasis on math and reading, which resulted in cutbacks in arts and foreign languages. The lack of funding especially affects Mandarin instruction, which requires instructors and materials which are often more expensive than other languages (for example, Spanish).

This article goes on to note that:

"According to the Center for Applied Linguistics, in 2008 only 4 percent of middle and high schools that offer foreign-language instruction included Mandarin. That's up from 1 percent in 1997. While that initially seems like respectable growth, the same survey reveals that 13 percent of schools still offer Latin and a full 10-fold more schools offer French than Mandarin.

We Know Chinese is Important, But...

If asked, most educated parents, and older high school students, in the U.S. will agree that China's growing economic growth during the last 10 years necessitates the need to learn Mandarin in order to be better prepared to succeed in the global economy.

However, there are two key challenges to overcome in order for students to develop a global competency in Chinese: study time (it normally takes close to four times the amount of study needed to become as fluent in Chinese as in a Western language (such as French or Spanish), and teachers (there is a lack of dynamic, engaging, effective teachers).

According to the ACTFL, foreign languages are divided into 4 categories, category I being the easiest, and category IV being the most difficult. Chinese (category IV) takes four times the amount of study time than French, Italian, or Spanish (which are all in category I).

Category I	Category II	Category III	Category IV
<i>Dutch, English*, French, Haitian Creole, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, Swahili and Swedish. +</i>	<i>German, Hindi, Indonesian, Punjabi and Urdu. +</i>	<i>Cambodian, Czech, Hmong, Hebrew, Hungarian, Lao, Polish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian**, Slovak, Tagalog, Turkish, Thai, Ukrainian and Vietnamese.+</i>	<i>Arabic, Cantonese, Japanese, Korean and Mandarin. +</i>

Source: <http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3642>

Dealing with the amount of time needed to become proficient is the easier part. If students are motivated and have teachers who are dynamic and engaging, and who are using a curriculum which is effective and robust, students will learn. (Info on the National Standards for Foreign Language teaching includes information on the “5Cs” framework, which is required for curriculum design in public schools.

<http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3392>)

Identifying, recruiting, training and retaining the most highly effective teachers are the trickier part. In many situations, the first challenge a Chinese teacher faces while working in a public or private school is to overcome the cultural differences and learn how to interact within the new culture.

Stereotypes are often based in fact. Some are:

- Chinese teachers are often quiet, sometimes rigid, and lack passion, so learning Chinese can be boring
- American students can be disrespectful, so having to deal with them is frustrating
- American parents are difficult (and sometimes litigious) so beware of them

During the last ten years, more students from China have come to the U.S. in order to teach. However, most have been raised in one-child homes, often without siblings or many cousins to engage with daily, so may not intuitively understand how to interact with children. Most of these teachers have come from a school system which values the teaching profession; respect for teachers is instilled from a very early age, so may find it hard to deal with the lack of respect teachers receive in the U.S. Those teachers who have grown up in China will have experienced larger classrooms, with a more “rote memorization” method of learning, little classroom interaction, and highly motivated students (due to cultural expectations, very strict standardized testing systems, and a great deal of competition due to lack of university spaces). Lastly, due to the growing need for Chinese teachers, many come here as students from China, are young, and do not have children of their own, so don’t understand the U.S. school system or U.S. teaching styles.

Americans (parents in particular, especially those on the East and West coasts) are culturally direct; Asians in general tend to use culturally indirect methods of communications.

From Brooks Peterson, [Cultural Intelligence: A Guide to Working with People from Other Cultures](#) (Boston: Intercultural, 2004, p 40):

A direct style means people prefer to

- be more direct in speaking and be less concerned about how something is said,
- openly confront issues or difficulties,
- communicate concerns straightforwardly,
- engage in conflict when necessary,
- express views or opinions in a frank manner, and
- say things clearly, not leaving much open to interpretation.

An indirect style means people prefer to

- focus not just on what is said but on how it is said,
- discreetly avoid difficult or contentious issues,
- express concerns tactfully,
- avoid conflict if at all possible,
- express views or opinions diplomatically, and
- count on the listener to interpret meaning.

These cultural challenges result in miscommunications and misperceptions which can only be overcome by each group reaching out to understand the other, but which are most effectively (and quickly) overcome by a comprehensive training program and ample opportunity for Chinese faculty members to engage with other teachers and participate in regular workshops, and observe classes / participate in teaching. This, however, results in a greater investment of resources by the school looking to implement the Chinese program.

Mandarin is easier than other Western languages in many ways: Chinese has negligible grammar - there is no need to conjugate verbs, worry about tenses, or match gender or number. What is much tougher for U.S. students, however, is the number of characters students have to memorize and the mastery of tones (depending on the inflection, the word ji could mean "chicken" or "to remember").

However, as most parents of U.S. students know, China will probably be the world's largest economy within twenty years and a monumental force in every dimension of life. Studying Chinese gives U.S. students insights into one of the world's great civilizations and creates a wealth of economic opportunities for those who can master the language and have an understanding of the culture.

As the Chinese economy surges, so does global interest in Mandarin. According to the Economist magazine [available at http://www.economist.com/node/17522444?story_id=17522444&fsrc=rss] the Chinese government estimates some 40m people currently study Mandarin outside the country, up from 30m in 2005. A tight job market in the West is partly responsible.

From this same report,

“According to a survey in September by Rosetta Stone, 58% of Americans believe the lack of foreign-language skills among native workers will lead to foreigners taking high-paying jobs. “The recession has focused people on where growth is going to come from,” says Tom Adams, the firm’s chief executive. Among existing corporate customers logging into the company’s multi-language programme, the number learning Mandarin increased by 1,800% between 2008 and 2010.”

The U.S. needs to do better job training a culturally savvy workforce. However, according to Newsweek [available at www.newsweek.com/2010/12/06/not-much-progress-in-america-s-chinese-problem.html] even though those 40 million foreigners are studying Mandarin outside of China, only 50,000 of them are in the United States.

How to Teach Chinese to a Multi-Cultural Class of American Students?

What can we do? How can we ensure that our children will be able to take advantage of the opportunities that learning Chinese offers? At our organization, the non-profit Chinese Language School of Connecticut, we have always believed outreach is key. If parents, teachers, staff, students and volunteers can reach out to groups such as China Institute, Asia Society, Ascend Pan-Asian Leadership, Committee of 1,000, Families with Children From China, and others, the synergy will create a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts.

However, more actionable steps include:

1. Create a tight curriculum with relevant, engaging, hands-on, age-appropriate activities, which is integrated into other school programs

Remember that you are teaching American students; very young children are used to being encouraged to “express themselves” all the time. Preschool teachers routinely sing and dance with children. This approach has many merits, but also means young children are not taught to sit still, and won’t be happy in a class where they are required to do a lot of sitting. (Parents won’t be happy, either.)

Make sure your materials conform to age-appropriate, relevant, topics. At CLSC, in some cases we had tried to use books supposedly designed for very young children, but these materials discussed topics such as “telling time” in their books for 4 and 5 year olds (which meant that we had to design our own material). For elementary-age and older students integrate tools such as SmartBoards, iPods (which offer Chinese applications) and real-time chat activities to help students practice when they’re not in class.

2. Integrate history, art and culture into the classroom to keep things engaging and provide historical perspective

This doesn’t mean only “correct, Ancient Chinese culture,” but, depending on students’ ages, should include the history of the Chinese court, warlords, and the Boxer Rebellion. American students (and parents) like debate: China takes a more positive view of the Boxers than Western countries do (probably because Western countries were the ones doing the invading), so have students debate the issues. Field trips to museums and restaurants are terrific, and can put learning in context. Creating art based on periods in Chinese history, or developing models of items the Chinese invented is interactive and fun, and can give students a sense of the global power China held for much of its 5,000+ history.

3. Bring in facets of modern day Chinese society

All students are interested in what children of their own age in other countries are doing each day. Have them learn about and discuss food, school, pop music, and modern history. Include details on the huge Chinese presence all over the world, such as in Singapore, Indonesia, Taiwan, Canada, and Malaysia. Engage your school in developing a sister school program with another school in China. Younger students can write (or email) pen pals. Older students can debate human rights, economic freedoms, and environmental issues.

Again, these activities are engaging for students of varying ages, but also put their Chinese language learning in context.

4. Teachers

Most important is recruiting and training teachers.

For younger students, preschool to grade 1, make certain the teachers are well-trained and focused on the curriculum, of course, but even more important should be the understanding of how they should interact and relate to the children. Smile, a lot. Laugh with them, sit on the floor and show interest in what they’re doing. Play music, sing songs, explain each word and then sing again. Do activities with music playing in the background. If teachers are hired who genuinely love children, and teaching, this will be relatively easy.

For older students, teachers should try to engage with them. This is relatively easy with first through fourth graders; they’re normally fairly easy going, friendly, and want to please their teachers. However, engaging with older students gets progressively harder, through the high school years. At CLSC we often see many teachers working diligently to engage with older students, they try and try, but often fail. Especially for older students, the teachers that normally accomplish the most are those who are friendly, but firm. Who establish and reinforce guidelines, lesson plans, and measurements. You may not be the most popular teacher, but you will gain students’ (and parents’) respect.

The best training for any teacher (indeed, anyone wishing to learn U.S. culture) is probably to “just do it” – get out there and experience as much as you can. Learn new topics in different areas, participate in as many professional development workshops as you can. Make friends with lots of different people. Ask other teachers (math, language arts,

Spanish teachers) if you can observe their classes (they'll be happy you asked). Share your culture and childhood experiences with your students.

5. Parents

Remember that most U.S. parents do not know anything about Chinese (except that they've heard it's "really hard"). Many do not know there is no Chinese "alphabet." They think each Chinese character is a "letter" that makes up a word. They don't understand the idea of a tonal language, and often cannot even differentiate between tones; they literally don't hear the difference.

If the children are young, and parents are with them in the class (or are expected to help them do homework or follow up with lessons), teachers need to communicate regularly, clearly, on what is expected. Parents are used to hearing from their children's teachers regularly, and they will need to hear from you in order to understand what their child is learning. Provide ideas and links for educational materials they can purchase in order to help their child learn. This goes for older students' parents, as well, but you might additionally email relevant articles of interest, such as Goldman Sachs' forecasts of how the Chinese economy will overtake the U.S.'s by 2027 (a good reason for their children to continue with Chinese), or how learning Mandarin can help them with standardized test-taking (the College Entrance Examination Board reported that "students who averaged 4 or more years of foreign language study scored higher on the verbal section of the SAT than those who had studied 4 or more years in any other subject area," from http://www.chineselanguageschool.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=21&Itemid=37).

When communities, schools, teachers and parents work together to help students understand China's enormous (and growing) global economic presence, they will be more likely to understand the importance of learning Chinese in order to develop a sense of Chinese history and culture, while cultivating a global worldview.

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