The teaching and learning of Chinese in primary schools in England: developing a new learning approach to support intercultural understanding

Dr Fotini Diamantidaki, Katharine Carruthers

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the state of the field with respect to the activity of the UCL Institute of Education (IOE) Confucius Institute (CI) for Schools, in promoting the teaching and learning of Chinese in secondary schools. After consideration of the state of the field in the secondary sector, the focus will be shifted to the new strand of work of the IOE Confucius Institute in primary schools in England (IOE CI 2014:1), as this is an emerging opportunity for further growth and expansion of the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese. More specifically, the paper will discuss the work of the IOE Confucius Institute with regards to implementing a new Programme of Study for primary schools with the aim of raising cultural awareness and intercultural understanding, through the inclusion of Chinese characters as an integral part of language learning at an early age. In order to support our argument on developing intercultural understanding, we shall draw on theories on the role of culture in foreign language learning (Brooks 1968, Byram: 1989, 1997, 2007; Kramsch 1993, 2001; Zarate 1993; Abdallah-Pretceille 2003; Dervin and Suomela-Salmi 2010). This chapter will finally seek to highlight areas of further development in regards to the creation of high quality resources and the training of non- Chinese speaking primary classroom teachers.

Introduction: The context in which the IOE Confucius Institute for Schools developed and how its activity is now sustained

The first National Annual Conference on Chinese Teaching in Schools took place in Cambridge, UK in the spring of 2004 with around 65 delegates; it was held in collaboration with the Association for Language Learning and the UK Federation of Chinese (Community) Schools. At this point, only a very small number of schools in England was offering any kind of Chinese provision, but those who were, were keen to share experiences and talk to each other. As an outcome of this first conference, a small e-forum for teachers of Chinese was set up at the time and some web pages were created to act as a 'virtual' staffroom, so that teachers of Chinese, many of whom felt rather isolated in their schools and localities, would be able to communicate with each other.

The conference marked a turning point in the development of Chinese teaching in schools. Although Chinese has not been widely taught in schools in England, interest has continued to grow dramatically. Political and business leaders have recognised the rise of Asia as one of the central facts of the twenty first century. China, with its economic growth and emergence as a cultural and political leader is integral to this shift of focus. Quah (2010) talks about the global economy's shifting centre of gravity and maintains that '… extrapolating to 2050 the global economy's centre of gravity will continue to shift east to lie between India and China'. Clearly, increasing the number of British students who can speak Chinese proficiently and can demonstrate an understanding of Chinese culture is crucial.

Alongside economic change, came the rise of coverage about China in the media and in TV programming. Chinese films, such as Raise the Red Lantern (1991) and Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon (2000), exhibitions about China, the British Museum's Terracotta Warrior Exhibition (2007) and the Royal Academy's Ai Weiwei exhibition (2015) for example, Chinese novels in translation, including the Chinese Nobel prize winner, Gao Xingjian's Soul Mountain (2000), the Beijing Olympics (2008) all added to increased awareness of China in the first decade of the twentieth century. Less expensive airfares to China enabled people to go and see the country for themselves. Parents doing business in China began to ask about opportunities for learning Chinese for their children. To meet this demand globally, the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban) was developing ways to support the growth of the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language and the first Confucius Institute was opened in 2004 in Seoul. -Confucius Institutes are set up abroad (i.e. outside China) to support the learning of Chinese as a foreign language. -

By the autumn of 2006 when the IOE Confucius Institute (IOE CI) for Schools first began, about 7-8% of all maintained secondary schools (around 230 schools) in England offered some form of Chinese provision with about 40% of this being off curriculum. Only 31% of schools had trained teachers teaching Chinese. This was set against the backdrop of September 2004, when the study of a foreign language became non-compulsory in Key Stage 4 in England (ie for 14-16 year olds) (Carruthers, 2012).

In July 2006, the Department for Education and Skills signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban) in Beijing around measures to expand the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese throughout the English education system. At the same time, the Specialist Schools and

Academies Trust (SSAT) also signed an agreement with Hanban to set up a schools-based Confucius Institute; the SSAT Confucius Institute was formally launched in July 2007. The SSAT Confucius Institute transferred to the Institute of Education, University of London in June 2012 to become the UCL Institute of Education Confucius Institute for Schools (IOE CI).

In its early days and from personal day to day work experience the IOE CI focussed its attention on working to remove the three barriers to the teaching and learning of Chinese in schools: namely lack of appropriate, localized teaching materials; lack of trained teachers and issues around accreditation. This work went alongside supporting and developing teachers and schools teaching Chinese.

The IOE CI is a bilateral project with Peking University and Peking University High School and is supported by the Office of Chinese Language Council International, Hanban. As well as a small team of specialists in London, the IOE CI has established a network of 42 Confucius Classrooms across England, schools which have both Chinese firmly embedded in their own curriculum and which give advice, support and taster classes to other schools in their region looking to start offering Chinese: For instance Kingsford Community School in Newham, London and Archbishop Sentamu Academy in Hull. The Confucius Classroom network originally consisted of five leading Confucius Classroom schools or "hubs", where Mandarin Chinese teaching was already strongly established; each of these "hub" schools reached out to and worked with 5 "spoke" schools delivering Chinese language lessons both on curriculum and at taster level with a view to encouraging these schools to invest in their own Chinese teacher and develop the teaching and learning of Chinese within school. This network was extended by a further 7 Confucius Classrooms in 2008 and a further 22 in 2010. There are now in 2016, in excess of 200 spoke schools working with the 42 Confucius Classrooms, 3 of which are based in primary schools.

The IOE CI has also worked, in partnership with Pearson on the development of teaching materials for Chinese with 3 student books (for 11-14 year olds and GCSE Chinese for 14-16 year olds) together with 2 work books and 3 teachers' books all under the series name: 进步一、二 Jìn bù. This was the first time that textbooks for teaching Chinese were published by a mainstream publisher in England and they have brought Chinese more closely into line with provision for other languages.

Growth of Chinese learning in Primary school classrooms

With the growth of the IOE Confucius Institute and its continuous sustainable work in the secondary school sector, the opportunity arises to implement a plan to introduce Chinese in the primary school sector in England. The Mandarin Chinese for Primary Schools Programme has been made possible thanks to support from the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) and the recent changes in England with regards to the national curriculum, whereby the learning of a foreign language is a compulsory subject across all KS2 year groups (age ranges from 7-11) starting from September 2014. In this respect, the Department for Education (DfE) guidance on KS2 Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) identifies a series of skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing that young learners should develop. The four following attainments targets as featured in the KS2 subject content for languages DfE (2013: 194) are representative of the range of skills to aim for:

- ***listen*** *attentively to spoken language and show understanding by joining in and responding*
- ***speak*** *in sentences, using familiar vocabulary, phrases and basic language structures*
- ***read*** *carefully and show understanding of words, phrases and simple writing*
- ***write*** *phrases from memory, and adapt these to create new sentences, to express ideas clearly*

Studying more closely the KS2 subject content for languages and the rest of the attainment targets as presented in the DfE (2013: 194-196) KS2 programme of study, it can be observed that there is a focus mainly on speaking and listening where pupils explore sounds through songs, listen to the target language, start developing accurate pronunciation and intonation with the view to speak to an audience in full sentences and engage in simple conversations. The reading and writing skills are less targeted at primary school level but the learners are still expected to show understanding on what they read and write phrases from memory as listed above in the last two bullet points.

All the attainment targets listed and discussed above are generic for all languages taught in primary school including Mandarin. The DfE (2013) gives no specific guidance on how to achieve the attainments above, nor does it suggest any process for assessing levels of attainment. The instruction, therefore, that ‘by the end of each key stage, pupils are expected

to know, apply and understand the matters, skills and processes specified in the relevant programme of study … ' implies a freedom to create such a programme of study and apply reasonable assessment criteria relevant to it for the language in question, in our case Mandarin.

In the meantime, Mandarin is being introduced in primary schools as a new language, where initially all pupils (in Yrs 3,4,5 and 6) will be learning the same material at the same time. The challenge is that if Mandarin is introduced as a new language it can result in a "staggered" progression over the first four years , with unequal levels of attainment by the end of Year 6 (last class of primary school), until the September 2014 Year 3 cohort reaches Year 6 (Trapp:2013:3). To address such a challenge and enhance attainment, this chapter suggests the implementation of a new programme of study which is designed to be sufficiently flexible to be adapted to any level of learning ability and appropriate to each year group. In particular, the suggested programme of study is aimed at extending elements of cultural awareness as part of an integrated language learning programme with the ambition to develop an inter-cultural understanding between the children's own culture and the culture of China.

The new programme of study for KS2 Mandarin

Trapp (2014) has written in this respect an outline Programme Of Study (PoS) for KS2 Mandarin which involves 30 teaching hours per year and a new revised version of the same document Trapp (2016) with inclusion of greater cultural content. The generally positive reception of the original programme of study (Trapp 2014) has encouraged the creation of a new version (Trapp 2016) in which the central language content and its approach have been retained, but they have been surrounded by more extensive and sophisticated cultural material designed both to emphasize the linguistic-cultural interface and to make more explicit opportunities for cross-curricular integration. The new version is based on 14 units and they are: knowledge about language, China, Chinese and saying hello, about me: names and questions, parts of the body, numbers and age 1-10, numbers 11-99 and measure words, family, countries and colours, pets and animals, food and drink, time-sun moon and stars, time and timetables, colours, going places. Each unit invites students to an adventure across different cities in China and as illustrated below:

Figure 1 My China Adventure

Trapp (2014: 2)

The new PoS, follows on from the old Framework for KS2 languages in England (DfE: 2014) and addresses the two key strands of Oracy and Literacy with suggestions to explore elements of culture and intercultural understanding for Chinese Mandarin.

From the simple enumeration of the units above, two things can be observed: first that the units are in line with the units addressed in other mainstreamed languages in England such as French and can be easily verified in any online schools' scheme of work such as the one from Roding Valley (2015) but at the same time the distinctiveness of Chinese culture is at the heart of the language teaching. To illustrate the latter, we share one snapshot of the objectives on speaking from 11th unit in the series on time – sun moon and stars, whereby we attempt to illustrate the direct link between the teaching of Chinese characters, Chinese culture and intercultural understanding (please observe the highlighted comments):

Figure 2 Time-Sun, Moon and Stars

Topic 11: Time-Sun, Moon and Stars

- Tongue twisters: ask the class if they know any English tongue twisters and/or share some of your own. Tell the class that Chinese has tongue twisters too and try out: 老师四十四岁，是不是？ and/or 妈妈赶马，马慢，妈妈骂马
- Start by talking about how the calendar works and use previous knowledge about Chinese New year to discuss the difference between the solar and lunar calendars. Do they know that our word "month" actually comes from the word "moon" and goes back to a time when we too used the lunar calendar.
- Explain that although Chinese festivals are based on the traditional lunar calendar, for everyday life China uses the same solar calendar as we do; and the way you say the date in Mandarin uses the words for both sun 日 and moon 月
- Introduce 天，今天，明天，昨天;
- Revise numbers 1-31 and then introduce month/day format x 月 y 日. Explain that in Mandarin big comes before little and that this will be a useful pattern to remember – look at how this is different in English and give examples: we say 21st January 2014 but the Chinese say 2014 January 21st; when we give addresses we say 21 Happy Lane, Funtown, Laughtershire, UK, but if you look at a Chinese letter, the address is written China, Laughter Province, Funtown, Happy Lane 21 (http://www.chinasnippets.com/2005/11/06/chinese-address-formats-western-addresses/)
- **N.B. YCT uses 号 for dates, so introduce it here as an alternative, mentioning it is also used in addresses for house/flat numbers. If you put the date in characters on your whiteboard, use 号.**
- With the children work out today's date, day and month, write it on the whiteboard in characters and model the phrase 今天是 x 月 y 日. Highlight 明天 and 昨天 and with the class work out 昨天是。。。明天是。。。 **n.b. highlight that 是 doesn't change, whereas in English we say "yesterday was" and if appropriate consider use of tenses in other languages the children know. Explain how Mandarin uses "marker" words and phrases to do the same job.**
- Tell the children to work out their birthdays in Chinese and compile a chart showing them with the children writing their own dates

Tell the children that days of the week are easy in Mandarin and that along with moon for month and sun for day, they also need to know the word for star: 星期 star period. Model days of the week 星期一， 二,三。。。天 and with the children work out how to say "today is…; tomorrow is….; yesterday was…"

Trapp (2014: 53-54)

From the highlighted parts, we can assert that in the new programme of study there is a continuous encouragement to make links with own culture and other languages and cultures the children may know and therefore practising ways of striving to achieve intercultural understanding and positioning themselves in the world. Another observation which is clear is that language and culture in Chinese are one. The suggestion for example above, that in order for the children to be able to say the date they will need to know the character for moon 月, sun 日 and star 星期, is an excellent illustration of the unique nature of Chinese language and culture that they function as one and a very beautiful and intriguing aspect of the Chinese language from an outsider's view of the world. A final observation in the figure above is the different colours the characters have; red, blue, green, black, brown. This is a very significant detail in relation to the teaching of tones and how teachers can instil memory skills in their pupils, with the aim of learning correct pronunciation, without the help of pinyin. An added advantage of the entire programme of study is that 'the units are not designed as single lessons, rather as groups of lessons that can be spread over several sessions, depending both on time available and depth of content' (Trapp 2013:3); a distinctive feature which addresses the necessity for creating a new flexible programme of study tailored to pupils' and teachers' needs.

Developing intercultural understanding

A vital characteristic of Mandarin, as also observed in figure 2 above, which is at the heart of the language's potential for opening up new ways of thinking, understanding and communicating for the young learner, is its essentially conceptual nature. In comparison with European languages which seek precision of meaning through complex grammar and precise vocabulary, Mandarin essentially uses context to refine a broader concept into a specific meaning (ibid). Whilst there are many words/characters with precise meanings and functions as parts of speech (noun, verb etc …), in many cases in Mandarin a single word/character may embody a concept which only acquires its specific meaning and/or function through its

particular context. As an illustration, the common word 快*kuài:* in terms of function, it illustrates the Chinese stative verb in its meaning "to be quick" as well as being a simple adjective (e.g. 快车*kuài chē* express train/bus). In terms of meaning, a simple dictionary search reveals a considerable range, either alone or in combination, including rapid, quick, speed, rate, soon, almost, to hurry, clever, sharp, forthright, plain-spoken, pleased and pleasant (Trapp, 2013:3).

This specificity of Mandarin is in line with what Brooks (1968:204) discusses in his work, that when learning a foreign language, the meaning of a word is the personal and societal life to which it refers to. In Mandarin, contextualising words and phrases, and sentence structure, take the roles which, in general, cases, tenses, genders, singulars and plurals play in other languages and carry a different message and meaning according to context. English speakers are familiar with the idea of one word having several different meanings, but in Mandarin this is at the very heart of understanding the language and the culture.

There seems to be unanimity amongst researchers in education that culture should be an integral part of language teaching (Byram: 1989, 1997, 2007; Kramsch 1993, 2001; Zarate 1993; Abdallah-Pretceille 2003; Dervin and Suomela-Salmi 2010, Piller 2011, Dervin and Liddicoat 2013). The remit dedicated to cultural aspects in language teaching has steadily grown in the last 20 years and 'learning a language is not only developing a useful professional skill, it is also understanding about the context and the motives that lie behind communication' (Quist 2000:137 as cited in Dervin and Suomela-Salmi 2010) . As highlighted in the previous quotation, learning a language for the sake of communication is not enough. Culture and raising cultural awareness should be at the heart of teaching and learning. Lu (1991) also goes a step further and discusses that teaching culture should assist students to improve cross-cultural language competency. Therefore, we can assert that the purpose of communication cannot be fulfilled without the appropriate knowledge of culture.

However, when exploring related literature on culture in the language classroom the concept of culture seems to be ambiguous and 'is still in need of a clear, commonly agreed definition' (Dervin and Suomela-Salmi: 2010). We can at least distinguish two ways in which we might categorise 'culture'. Is it what Lawes calls 'ethno-culture': 'focusing on daily life, customs and traditions which are more relevant and accessible to young people' (Lawes, 2007:87) or

is it 'enrichment culture' (ibid) meaning 'a result of a society's development over centuries encompassing geography, history, political systems, social institutions and all forms of art?' (Dervin and Suomela-Salmi: 2010:143)

A plausible way forward would be not to label culture either as ethno-culture or as enrichment culture, but as a broader social concept that constantly evolves and is alive according to existing conditions (Zhao:1992). This aspect of culture as a live and evolving organism, clearly reflects the equally evolving culture and multi-cultures represented in the language classrooms in England. It also emphasises the necessity to share a culture where by the young learners can make links with their own individual cultures and to be given the opportunity to '…reflect about different cultures [allowing] space for cultural understandings to increase' (Race 2015:12).

The process of construction of inter- cultures is achieved according to Dervin and Liddicoat (2013:7) through interaction and through different 'methods such as participant- observation, self-reflexive essays, role-plays, simulations and even sojourns abroad' have been used for allowing learners to develop what Byram (1997) calls *'intercultural communicative competence',* : a process achievable by a number of *savoirs.* He defines the first *savoir* as the 'knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction' (Byram, 1997: 58). *Savoir-comprendre* is defined as 'the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own' (Byram, 1997: 61). *Savoir-apprendre/faire* is the 'skill of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction' (ibid). *Savoir s'engager* is 'the ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries' (Byram, 1997: 63). Finally, *savoir-être* is 'the curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own' (Byram, 1997: 57). On the basis of this conceptual definition of intercultural competence, the role of the teacher in the Chinese foreign language classroom is to teach the skills, processes and the knowledge required to understand the target language country and culture the pupils are studying and also teach the pupils how to critically evaluate their own culture. This can be achieved according to Byram (1997) not only through an awareness of each other's cultures but also

through the teaching of language and communication, hence the concept 'intercultural communicative competence', interpreted as language and culture functioning together at all levels with the view to achieve intercultural understanding.

The teaching and learning of Chinese in the primary school classroom: challenges and solutions

With the above theoretical framework in mind we shall aim to discuss the challenges faced in the classroom in relation to the interpretation of culture and the teaching of Chinese characters. We will attempt to offer a new programme of study and a suggestion to adopt new strategies in the teaching of characters and presenting culture. We have established that Chinese characters carry meaning and equally elements of culture according to context. In order to simplify the process of language acquisition and meaning for young learners used to the Roman alphabet, teachers in England currently use the Romanization system pinyin as part of the process of acquiring vocabulary (Zhang & Zhu, 2007). The challenge faced subsequently, is that characters are overwhelmed by pinyin in the process of acquiring new vocabulary, and an over reliance on pinyin seems to be observed especially in the process of practising pronunciation at the early stages (Shu, Zeng and Chen, 1993).

In addition, the current standard explanation of the 4 tones of Mandarin Chinese: a high flat tone, a rising tone, a falling and rising tone and a falling tone, to learners of Chinese as a foreign language is that they represent four different ways of saying the same sound; in fact, not only is this inaccurate, it also again introduces an unnecessary extra layer of complexity. The sounds *mā má mă mà* actually represent four different sounds in their own right, with the tone being an integral part of the phoneme, not an additional element. Pinyin with tone marks is, of course, a valuable aide-memoire, but it should not be the primary point of access into learning correct pronunciation. (Trapp, 2013:3).

A suggestion would be to relegate pinyin at primary level to the role of 'prompt' rather than a first reference and the principal association the learner makes is between character and sound, allowing for a firmer foundation of correct pronunciation, by putting emphasis on hearing and reproducing and not recording (ibid). Young learners have no difficulty hearing and reproducing Mandarin Chinese sounds including their tonal value without deconstructing them, and it is this ability that should be harnessed (ibid). Another fundamental tool would be

the consistent use of colour-coding for tone in introducing new characters. Thus, **all** new characters that are read in the 1st tone are red, 2nd tone brown and so on. This method also provides another strategy for character recognition and memorization (ibid). The incorporation of a visual cue into the presentation of new vocabulary serves to reinforce oral/aural learning without pinyin diluting the immediacy of the characters non-phonetic representation of sound.

Directly related to this in the field of character learning discussed above is the relevance of teaching the structure of characters; understanding of this structure is an important link in the process of understanding Mandarin as a whole (Trapp 2013: 3). Although characters have evolved into a far more complex writing system than their primarily pictographic origins as 甲骨文 (oracle bone script) in the Bronze Age Shang Dynasty, a few survive in contemporary usage unchanged (王 *wáng* king). Others have become increasingly stylized with the passage of time, but still retain the essence of their pictographic origin (马*mǎ* horse; 龟*guī* tortoise). Some simple rebuses such as 上/下 (*shàng/xià* above/below) have continued in use through the millennia as their immediacy could not be improved. A classroom investigation of this part of character development has proved an effective way of engaging young learners with the basic concept of Chinese characters. A relatively small number of characters are 会意字*huìyìzi* compound ideograms such as 好*hǎo* where the ideograms for woman and child are combined to form a character meaning "good". Around 90% of characters in current usage, however, are the 形声字 *xíngshēngzì* phono-semantic combination characters formed by the two elements of radical and phonetic. (ibid) Although the phonetic component is no longer any reliable guide to contemporary pronunciation, the radical remains often a useful indicator of the category of meaning the character carries. Whilst native Chinese speakers acquire their character vocabulary as whole units through constant exposure, breaking characters down into these "building blocks" provides an analytic key for non-native learners of all ages (ibid). Equally importantly, approaching the learning of characters in this way directly supports understanding of the conceptual nature of Mandarin Chinese in both written and spoken form.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have strived to demonstrate the impact of the sustained activities of the UCL IOE CI in London in regards to the secondary and most importantly for this paper, in the primary sector. The newly designed programme of study for KS2 Mandarin is an exciting new opportunity for further growth and expansion of research in the teaching of Mandarin Chinese. We also hope that we have demonstrated that the new programme of study is crafted by theoretical underpinnings in mind, based on principles of culture and inter-cultural understanding. However, it is too early formally to assess the efficacy of the KS2 programme of study, but it has been in use across the country by both qualified language teachers and Chinese language assistants. Informal feedback from training undertaken with these groups has indicated both understanding of and support for its approach and the flexibility it provides for integration with other materials. In training specifically undertaken with UK teachers new to Mandarin Chinese, the inclusion of the element of inter-cultural understanding was seen as essential. One of the most important functions it also seems to perform is to encourage native –speaker teachers, particularly those on one or two year placements from China, to look beyond the traditional and somewhat stereo-typed concepts of Chinese culture incorporated in their training, and draw on more personal experience and interests; a process that draws teachers' 'attention to both salient and subtle differences between different cultural groups when intercultural differences are systematically examined and cautiously interpreted.' (Zhu Hua 2014: 199).

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