Essay

Teaching and/or Learning Chinese as an Additional Language: Challenging Terminology and Proposed Solutions

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Abstract

The Chinese language is becoming one of the most important languages in the world. The demands and interests in learning Chinese as an additional language are rapidly growing, but research in this area has not kept up with the accelerated development of this promising field. A key issue immediately faced in this area of research is the variety of identifying or descriptive terms (e.g., Chinese as a *second, foreign, international, heritage, subsequent, additional* language) that are inconsistently used. As will be expanded on below, this has created confusion and difficulty in research and teaching and learning practice. This paper details the examination of these perplexing terms, and the proposal of *teaching and/or learning Chinese as an additional language* as a viable term, as it is politically and pedagogically appropriate. The purpose of the study is to identify terminology that can be used to deepen our understanding and enhance the quality of teaching and/or learning Chinese as an additional language in the present global culture.

Chinese language is emerging as one of the most important languages in the world, primarily due to the rise of China's economic and political significance (Finn, Lu, De Pitta, Young, & Ye, 2013). An increasing number of people are learning Chinese in numerous countries on all continents for a variety of purposes, such as academic, political, historical, literary, commercial, trading, touristic, and leisure (Duff, 2008). Programs for teaching and/or learning Chinese are currently offered in diverse learning environments such as elementary, secondary, public and private schools; as credited or non-credited courses in higher institutions; business sectors; government agencies; community centres; and military bases (Duff, 2008). Learning is available via face-to-face instruction, online lessons, and computer-mediated interactions, and the demand for Chinese language training continues to grow (Finn, Lu, De Pitta, Young, & Ye, 2013). In contrast, however, research and publications on teaching and/or learning Chinese as a second language have not kept pace with the rapid development of this promising field (Li, 2008; Xu, 2010). Research supports and guides informed and effective policy-making, organization, teacher education, and development of programs and learning materials; thus, the limited availability of pertinent research in this field significantly affects the quality of teaching and/or learning Chinese as a second language.

In the present study, it was found that one of the most important challenges in this area of research may be the variety of inconsistent terminology relating to identifiers and descriptors (see Table 1). This inconsistency causes confusion and problems in research (e.g., ineffective literature search), as well as in teaching and learning practice (see problems or limitations listed in Table 1). In fields such as linguistics, language, and education, terms are employed to categorize learners with similar characteristics. The intended purpose of this categorization is to delineate a boundary between those who speak Chinese as a first language and those who are learning it as a non-first language. These terms have a profound influence on what we perceive with regard to this field of study and its teachers, learners, and their identity and relationships (Webster & Lu, 2012). For example, *Chinese as a second language* is not an accurate term to use with respect to individuals who learn Chinese as a third or fourth language, and *Chinese as a foreign language* may not be an appropriate descriptor when referring to multicultural societies such as those in Canada.

Table 1
Terms used in the field of teaching and/or learning Chinese as a second language

Terms	Examples	Advantages	Problems or limitations
second	Canadian Teaching Chinese as a Second Language Association	distinct from the *first* language	Chinese may not be the second language for many people
foreign	Centre for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (Oxford University, UK)	distinct from *domestic* language	separates (vs. embraces) Chinese from other languages
international	MA in Teaching Chinese as an International Language, Chinese University of Hong Kong	distinct from *domestic* language and intended to *promote* Chinese	Chinese is currently not an international language etc.
heritage	Teaching Chinese as a Heritage/Foreign Language, professional certificate, UC Berkeley, USA	distinct from mainstream language	implies Chinese as part of a tradition different from the mainstream
subsequent	Teaching Chinese as a subsequent language (in academics)	distinct from the *primary* or another language	emphasis of Chinese as a following language in time or order
additional	Teaching Chinese as an additional language (proposed)	distinct from the *first* language and treating all learned languages equally	may not distinguish this field or this learner group effectively

Language is a powerful means by which a civilization perpetuates its values, whether they be its proudest accomplishments (e.g., *bravo!*) or its most handicapping prejudices (e.g., Negro) (Radloff, 1974). Language is equally capable of opening or confining our views, and it can shape our thinking and actions (e.g., fusion of horizon) (Gadamer, 1994; Young & Fitzgerald, 2006). Language is not a neutral medium; rather, it is populated and imbued with the intentions of others (Bakhtin, 1981). Socially constructed terms illustrate the discursive field of a given subject or discipline and its related meaning; thus, commonly used terms must be thoroughly understood, and researchers and professionals must be conscious and careful about any underlying messages accompanying the terms (Webster & Lu, 2012).

This paper examines the extant perplexing terms, and proposes an alternative term that is politically, socially, linguistically, and pedagogically appropriate in order to deepen our understanding and enhance the quality of teaching and/or learning Chinese as a second language.

Terms in the Field of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language

As suggested by the results of the present study, there are a number of terms used as identifiers or descriptors that refer to the same field, including: teaching Chinese as a second language; teaching Chinese as a foreign language; teaching Chinese as an international language; teaching Chinese as a heritage language; teaching Chinese as a subsequent language; and, teaching Chinese as an additional language (see the summary in Table 1). Some terms, such as international, foreign, second, and heritage, have been commonly used in government documents, school curricula, community programs, and academic or professional organizations, while others (such as subsequent and additional) are loosely used in academic or professional publications. Further, *Chinese language learning* is occasionally used to refer to the *Chinese as a second language* field, but it is only intended as a distinction from other types of language learning; furthermore, it is rather too broad and vague to join the array of terms in the field of teaching/learning Chinese as a second language. Another term, Chinese as a *modern* language or a *modern* foreign language, has been adopted to distinguish it from deceased languages in some institutions; however, it is obvious that Chinese should not be categorized as a modern language, as it is both an ancient language and a modern language that has been in use for thousands of years (Xu, 2012).

The word *second* implies not only number two in a sequence or coming after the first, but also being subordinate or inferior in position, rank or importance (Stevenson, 2010). This word

can be perceived as ignorant and disrespectful when it relates to the great number of people who speak multiple languages, of which Chinese may be the third or fourth language in their regular repertoire. This particularly holds true in countries like Canada, where many people learn Chinese as a third language after English and French. Also, the ranking (e.g., first, second, third, etc.) of languages used by many young individuals will in fact change when they migrate to other regions or countries where different languages are spoken. For example, Chinese children or adolescents who migrate with their parents to Canada will have their first language, Chinese, become the second or third language after the two official languages (English, French). Thus, it seems inaccurate and disrespectful to categorize these learners who are studying Chinese as a first or second language. Likewise, one of the most popular terms, ESL (English as a second language), is also evidently an inaccurate term used worldwide (Webster & Lu, 2012). The same argument applies for learning French as a second language (FSL) or Spanish as a second language (SSL), and so forth. By the same token, terms such as bilingual education or bilingualism are no longer representative as they do not reflect the fact that, in many parts of the world today, numerous people speak more than two languages.

The terms *teaching and/or learning Chinese as an international language* are commonly used in some jurisdictions, such as the public school systems in the provinces of Alberta and Ontario, Canada (Alberta Ministry of Education, n.d.; Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d.). With regard to the term *international language,* many languages that are used internationally, such as English, French and Arabic, have become widely used abroad primarily as a result of colonization or religious endeavours; Chinese, however, has not become an international language in the way these languages have. In other words, although Chinese is one of the six official languages employed in United Nations and is used by 1.3 billion people around the world, it is not commonly used as an official language between nations (*inter-national*). Nonetheless, it is predicted that Chinese will be a global language, and a significant networking and business language of the future (Lo Bianco, 2007).

Foreign refers to being of, from, in, or characteristic of a country or language other than one's own; to dealing with or relating to other countries; and, it also refers to the strange or unfamiliar (Stevenson, 2010). The term *foreign* can easily distinguish the field of Chinese language teaching and learning from domestic official language(s) as is the case in the United States and China. The use of *foreign* is clearly intended to differentiate an *outside* language from

the domestic official language(s), but it manifests as an ethnocentric view in languages and cultures. Ethnocentrism (a term created by William Summer in the early 1900s), inherent and natural to any cultures or people to some degree, is a viewpoint in which one's own cultural group is the centre and all others are judged in reference to it or through one's own cultural presuppositions (Barfield, 2000; Summer, 1906). Ethnocentrism is learned unconsciously from birth through language acquisition and socialization, but it has been lessened in recent years as a result of increasing internet connectivity, tourism, and human migration (Iordan, 2013). In contrast, cultural relativism, a principle developed by Franz Boas in the early 1900s, argued that all existing cultures equally deserve respect and should not be subjected to invidious judgments of worth or value by others (Barfield, 2000). The transition from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism (or cultural relativism) is an important development for all cultures and individuals in today's globalized environment, and it requires an open mind and an inclusive spirit. Given the benefits of developing cultural relativism, it is quite problematic that Chinese is still regarded as a *foreign* language (a seeming ethnocentric view) in the United States when Chinese is the most widely spoken home language, after English and Spanish (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

The term *heritage language* principally refers to an immigrant language, or indigenous, ancestral, or former colonial languages (Wiley, 2005). *Heritage language* is also used synonymously with *mother tongue, native language*, and *community language* to refer to a language (utilized by immigrants and probably their children) other than mainstream official languages (Shin, 2010). This term is typically employed to address concerns about the possible loss of a heritage language due to it not being significantly valued, either historically or in current times, by individuals or a society at large. Usage of heritage languages takes place mostly within the home or within the cultural community and, despite the value and benefit of maintaining heritage languages, their usage declines with the passing of time and the passing of generations, as they are not taught or fostered in schools (Cho, Shin, & Krashen, 2004; Wiley, 2005). Perhaps due to this containment of heritage languages, the term tends to carry a negative undertone and, in the case of the Chinese language, does not adequately reflect the rising importance of learning Chinese in a contemporary world setting.

In addition to the terms above, *subsequent* has been used in academics, as in *teaching English as a subsequent language* (Applied Linguistics, 2013). Literally, *subsequent* refers to coming after something in time, or being next in sequence specifically as a result of effect

(Stevenson, 2010). This term may not carry the misleading implications that the other terms above incur, but it still has an overtone of learning Chinese after another language as a result of effect. It is not plausible that people learn Chinese *subsequently* as an effect of knowing any other language (Finn, Lu, De Pitta, Young, & Ye, 2013). In other words, there may not be any causal connections between any languages that an individual has previously mastered and learning Chinese.

Additional refers to something added, extra, or supplementary to what is already present or available. It implies uniting, joining, putting in, or putting together elements to calculate a total value (Hoad, 1996; Stevenson, 2010). The use of the term *additional* in the context of teaching or learning Chinese as an additional language (CAL) generates a positive, wholistic, and encouraging implication that promotes a better understanding and greater connotation of respect (Webster & Lu, 2012). The CAL term embodies the four interrelated dimensions essential to the establishment of an effective and accurate definition: a) degree of proficiency in relation to language competence; b) domain of use and purpose of language use; c) context of language acquisition; and d) acknowledgement of cultural and linguistic diversity (Webster & Lu, 2012). In comparison with the aforementioned terms, *teaching and/or learning Chinese as an additional language* is a politically, socially, linguistically, and pedagogically appropriate alternative. Furthermore, this term would also be valid in China to refer to Chinese ethnic minorities who learn Mandarin Chinese as an additional language, or non-Chinese who learn any types of Chinese language as an additional language.

On a different but related note, numerous curriculums, programs, organizations, journals, or magazines only refer to themselves as *teaching* Chinese as a foreign (or second) language (Finn, Lu, De Pitta, Young, & Ye, 2013). This bypasses the crucial element, which is *learning* Chinese as a foreign (or second) language. Failing to reflect the importance of learning may be due to a lack of awareness and insufficient research (Xu, 2010). All efforts made during the teaching process (e.g., the planning, implementation, and assessment of learning) should always have learning as their prime focus. Unlike teaching, learning is an extremely complex phenomenon that is not yet well understood (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008). Without a good understanding of how students learn, it is difficult to make teaching truly effective. In a research-based book that is influential in the West, *Teaching and Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language*, Xu (2006) has regrettably indicated that a limitation of her book is the absence of

discussions about the importance of students and learning—an imbalanced perspective that considerably limits our advancement in this field. In fact, there are a number of available learning theories (e.g., complexity learning theory, constructivist learning theory) in education, psychology, linguistics, and other fields that could significantly enhance the quality of teaching Chinese as additional language.

Conclusion

Language, as the primary means to communicate our thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings, has an essential impact on our daily lives and professional practice (Webster & Lu, 2012). Utilization of language is incredibly pervasive and not only affects society's perceptions of others, but also an individual's perceptions of self (Blaska, 1993; Gates, 2010). For individual learners, language can add value to their existing capacities, empower them to identify their wholistic potential, and motivate them to develop their confidence in achieving success. In order to create and maintain a more inclusive learning environment, the examination of respectful and appropriate terms is both necessary and imperative from a contemporary global perspective (Webster & Lu, 2012).

Based on the analysis above, the aforementioned terms as identifiers or descriptors are not necessarily exchangeable. Some of them are no longer up to date for our modern society, and in fact produce various degrees of narrow-minded, negative, prejudicial, offensive, or arrogant connotations. Although there may not be an absolute consensus for a universal term, teaching and/or learning Chinese as an additional language (CAL) presents as a respectful, wholistic alternative that is politically, socially, linguistically, and pedagogically appropriate. Furthermore, when referring to individuals, the terms *learners* or *teachers* of Chinese as an additional language (CAL) should be employed because the use of a *person-first* language places the emphasis on the person rather than his/her ability, which is currently deemed politically, socially, and pedagogically correct (Webster & Lu, 2012). Researchers and educators in all language teaching and/or learning areas should be aware of the flawed nature of relevant terms, and intentionally utilize politically, socially, linguistically, and pedagogically appropriate terms such as teaching and/or learning Chinese as an additional language (CAL); teaching and/or learning English as an additional language (EAL); teaching and/or learning French as an additional language (FAL), and so on. In so doing, the area of teaching/learning additional languages can be

properly defined; the language learners can be truly valued and respected; and, in turn, the

quality of teaching and/or learning can be further enhanced.

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