

CURRENT PROBLEMS OF THE MODERN METHODOLOGY OF TEACHING CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR BEGINNERS

Strukova Polina

Xiamen University, 442 Siming Nan, Xiamen, Fujian, P.R. China 362005

Abstract

Regarding the education system, nowadays requirements for the Chinese language proficiency are fundamentally different compared to those that existed few decades ago. According to our research, there are no significant changes in the methods that are used to teach Chinese to beginners; which means an inefficient teaching system. This article provides a brief overview of the actual way Chinese language is taught in Russia, country with long history of TCFL practices. This article also presents some of the achievements of Confucius Institutes abroad (outside China). In addition, it distinguishes and analyzes actual problems of TCFL system during the first levels, and other issues related to the choice of teaching materials and their content. It offers solutions and outlines, current goals and problems of the modern TCFL study, in the context of modern methodology, based on the communicative approach of teaching foreign languages.

Key words: Chinese as a foreign language, teaching methodology, communicative approach, the Confucius Institute, elementary level

Regarding the education system, nowadays requirements for the Chinese language proficiency are fundamentally different compared to those that existed few decades ago. The communicative approach to language learning became popular in the second half of the '80s as well as the second half of the '90s and around the year 2000 the TCFL concept was quickly spread. This method has been widely discussed as the category of global competence, linguistic personality and linguistic consciousness. It does not only deal with student proficiency minimum vocabulary in accordance with the grammatical and syntactical structure of the Chinese language, but also focuses on foreign language related concepts like culture, communicative and behavioral skills. In other words, the main focus of the discipline "Foreign Language", including Chinese, should be put on "the formation of students' multi-layer and multi-component set of language abilities, skills, readiness to implement the speech acts of varying difficulties, actions, include the identification and characterization of the motives and goals driving the development of the individual, his own behavior" (Kupriianova & Peresad'ko 2014).

Nevertheless, after years of studying Chinese, some students encounter problems when they face a real language environment and when they have to communicate with native speakers. How can this situation be explained? How can the Chinese learning process be improved at the primary level in order to avoid this inconvenient for foreign language students?

Despite the huge amount of teaching materials, the impressive domestic experience, the development of Confucius Institutes and the modern multimedia learning tools, still there are some problems when it comes to material and textbook selection. In this paper, we will try to discuss some of these issues.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF TCFL IN RUSSIA TODAY

Despite the close and strong connections with China, the cooperation and friendly relations between the two countries, the demand for teachers of Chinese as a foreign language not only for the university students but also for other social groups, the Russian system of teaching Chinese is not very flexible, showing some advantages and disadvantages.

According to T.D. Alexeeva (2009), modern approaches of language training for universities and private schools vary in duration of study (from 140 to 800 classroom hours) and in learning purposes, which implies a different level of language proficiency.

At the same time, without going into details about the way each individual course is organized, there are three main purposes of learning Chinese (Kochergin 2000):

1. Learning foreign language as part of a professional activity (suppose to be called “academic” or “philological”).
2. Learning a foreign language as a tool to solve other (non-linguistic) problems (suppose to be called “application”).
3. Learning a foreign language as a mean of non-professional communication (suppose to be called “practical” or “domestic”).

Logically, each of these three main reasons to learn Chinese includes other purposes downstream, but not vice versa. This particularity must be considered when choosing learning and teaching materials. At first glance, Chinese is another foreign language like English, Spanish, German or Russian, but because of the peculiarities of the phonetics, grammatical and lexical structures, the selection of methods and tools meets different requirements and should be specific since the very beginning.

Talking more in detail, the competence approach when teaching foreign languages, as well as the underlying communicative teaching method, is widely used among the techniques to teach Western languages in recent decades. According to Iu.A. Kupriyanova and T.V. Peresadko, nowadays at the initial stage of learning Chinese in Russia and several other Western countries linguistic approach is still being used. This is based on the contrast of the concepts of “language” and “speech” (2014).

This approach includes dissected and consistent language acquisition and activation of this material, which is suppose to develop the students' ability to use learning language during conversations. However, in many countries the basis of Chinese language learning is specially focused on hieroglyphics, written language and practical grammar. In fact it works as grammar-translation method, but it does not include all the aspects of proper language training. This is confirmed by the fact that in the subsequent stages there is a special attention to the development of written communication skills. Teachers seem to care mainly about the ability to read and analyze journalistic, scientific and official texts, improving translation skills. However, the development of good oral skills appears to be ignored (Kupriyanova & Peresad'ko 2014).

This tendency of not paying special attention to oral skills has prevailed in our country for a long time. For example, when the first wave of Chinese Language learners came in the second half of the XX century, the principal purpose was to prepare specialists in charge of selection, analysis and translation of materials for high-level talks or publications in the press, but not engaged in daily contacts with the Chinese people. Furthermore, at that time free communication with native speakers in daily life or in the net was just not available at all.

Speaking about teaching Chinese today, it would be desirable to provide a brief overview of popular teaching materials that are used in Russia, that are quite clearly described in the picture. Traditionally, for the beginners there is one popular Chinese language textbook «**Basics on the Chinese language. Main course**» (1983) been used for several decades. This textbook is created by talented teachers T.P. Zadoenko and Huang Shuying, which is based on consciously practical approach to learn. Other popular textbook «**Basic course of Chinese language**» (2010) also created by T.P. Zadoenko and Huang Shuying is a new version of the previous one, edited and corrected. Renovation of library funds is going relatively slow nowadays, so from time to time teachers prefer to use edition 1983 instead of a new one because of its so called “sustainability”.

Unfortunately, these textbooks do not longer meet modern requirements: lexical material is outdated, the texts are not authentic and do not correspond to the real communication situations; there are no communication exercises, which are very important (Kupriyanova & Peresad'ko 2014).

Another tutorial for teachers and students is well-structured, very detailed and full of linguistic specific terms – «**Practical Chinese course in 2 volumes**» by A.F. Kondrashevsky, M.V. Romyantsev and M.G. Frolov. It already passed 11 editions by 2010.

These manuals are widely used when teaching Chinese in the universities and in private schools, mainly contribute to the formation of grammatical skills, virtually eliminating the possibility of forming the basis of their oral skills. According to I.V. Kochergin (2000), this approach can lead to “a false idea of communicative synonymy of various grammatical phenomena that leads to the stylistic and logical mistakes in the speech at the grammar (syntax) level”. Taking into account that the use of the textbook does not give expected results, it is recommended to be used as a reference book on phonetics and grammar of the Chinese language for teachers mostly.

Another popular textbook to teach Chinese at an elementary level is «**Practical Course of Chinese language**» by Su Zhuytsin, Wang Luxia, Starostin S.P. (2007). This tutorial was based on authentic textbook «Shiyong Hanyu Keben» designed for foreign students and translated to several languages. According to Iu.A. Kupriyanova and T.V. Peresadko (2014) it meets most of the requirements for the communicative method of teaching foreign languages. Formation of oral skills contributes a large amount of situational tasks, which are absent in the textbook exercises, aimed to develop learners' listening skills. Despite the obvious advantages of this tutorial, it should be also considered the lack of authentic texts and language material, which does not fully reflect the peculiarities of speech etiquette of modern society in China.

Nevertheless, in Russia there are different well-planned and well-designed textbooks and manuals on the spoken Chinese language. However, as a rule, they are designed for students who already understand the basics of phonetics and have certain lexical and grammatical knowledge, in other words, for advanced level students (Kochergin 2000).

2. CONTRIBUTION OF CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES

When we are talking about teaching Chinese as a foreign language in the world, we cannot ignore the contribution of Confucius Institutes in China and abroad, their active participation forming the general concept of teaching Chinese to foreigners, their creation of test systems and their development of teaching aid for different levels for all ages and social groups. Let us dwell on the fact that we offer something interesting to our colleagues and Methodologists, working on different approaches to teach foreign languages, and, of course, Chinese.

The first Confucius Institute (hereinafter CI) was established in November 21, 2004 in the capital of the Republic of Korea, Seoul, and the organization Hanban (State Office for the dissemination of Chinese language abroad) has been operating since 2002. In total, our country has 22 CI (some say 20). For 10 years Global Confucius Institutes around the world, teachers and curriculum have achieved impressive results in the promotion of Chinese culture and language among non-Chinese citizens (Strukova 2015).

Leaving aside political, financial and law aspects of the organization, talking about what kind of developments and issues are related to CI students and applied in our country and in the world.

One of the main achievements of the Confucius Institute, in our view, is the development of high-quality teaching aids in Chinese language teaching for students from different countries. CI also proposed the «**Standards for Teachers of Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages**» (Chinese Language Council International Office 2009), and most importantly – «**International learning program for Chinese language**» (Chinese Language Council International Office 2007), which clearly marked stages of learning and the subjects that have to be taught in each one of them. It clearly builds a sequence of grammatical structures recommended to be studied, with attached list of relevant vocabulary for each topic. This program is not a textbook, but can be used as a good reference tool for the teacher. Of course, it remains an open question that is the proposed adaptation of the logical sequence of the grammar and lexical units' composition, separated by categories. We verified the materials in this program in terms of the principles of functional grammar and cognitive-psychological features for Russian-speaking students.

At the same time, «International Program» can be a support for the methodologists, who are creating new teaching aids that meet modern requirements. We would like to stress that, according to the CI

Methodologists in Canada, one of the main problems is that the current program lacks of a single national standard in teaching Chinese language, even at a wide variety of textbooks from CI and implementation of a wonderful platform to create their own materials - <http://www.cltguides.com/>. This entails certain problems of the learning process in higher education institutions, which we will discuss more in detail.

List of educational and methodical complexes (Xiamen University 2014), issued by CI this year in different countries (except China), clearly show us that despite the feeble attempt to update the range of textbooks from domestic universities, CI actively publishes and supports publishing anthologies, textbooks, workbooks, directories and additional literature of cultural plans for the all countries. A distinctive feature of all materials is how it is adapted to foreign language readers. For example, in Switzerland, where the Chinese language has become more and more popular, over the last 10 years, only two Chinese language textbook were released. In Spain there exists a unique adapted textbook from CI. In Russia, 13 CI departments issued 32 manuals.

According to the general survey of released materials, most of them are rather suitable for teaching “Intercultural Communication” or “culture of the Eastern countries” in high school, but not for teaching the basics of the Chinese language in universities or private schools (Strukova 2015). The largest number of teaching materials was produced in Thailand, Japan, Italy, England and the United States. There are 868 complexes (Xiamen University 2014) released outside the China. It should be noted that the lack of modern materials encourages teachers to borrow textbooks from the other target groups, which often leads to a weakening of interest among students, mistakes and misunderstandings in the assimilation and application of grammatical and lexical materials.

CI actively develops software, applications and plug-ins for interactive Chinese language learning, as well as to prepare for the HSK exam (State exam for Chinese language). It seems to us that these methods are good for intermediate and advanced level students, as well as for entertainment purposes only. These CI achievements may not fully meet the requirements for beginners, which involves the study and mastery of the phonetics, grammar and vocabulary basics of the Chinese language in order to successfully communicate with native language speakers.

3. CURRENT PROBLEMS AND WAYS TO OPTIMIZE LEARNING PROCESS

Discussing the main flow and perceived pitfalls in modern methods of Chinese language teaching for beginners, we would like to briefly list the problems faced by not only our Russian-speaking colleagues, but also CI representatives in other countries. Even more, if possible, we will suggest ways to optimize the learning process, taking into account previous experience and principles of modern methodology.

As we mentioned before, the main disadvantage of linguistic approaches is the grammar-translation approach that was extremely popular in our country during the second half of the XX century. This is the lack of attention to oral forms of communication, which creates a language barrier in students' mind that not only does not disappear but also makes free communication in the target language impossible and even “painful”. Of course, it has a detrimental effect on the quality and speed of “forming communicative competence required for a comprehensive in-depth exploration of the chosen specialty and follow-up work with native speakers” (Kupriianova & Peresad'ko 2014).

Thus, on the basis of existing teaching materials in Russia in the early stage of learning is only possible formation of general skills, and only then formed on the basis of language skills is the development of oral communication skills. Therefore, we can identify the first drawback of modern methods of teaching: **insufficient study of oral communicative exercises in the context, which is close to real life.**

N.S. Prabhu (Mao 2014) proposes to solve the problem by using more communicative exercises during Chinese lesson. In this case the purpose would be to have students detecting information gaps and trying to complete missing information, detect and establish logical connections between sentences or situations, as well as expressing their opinion on a particular questions or concerns.

Fortunately, these exercises can be found into the cycle of lessons in almost all modern teaching materials (Mao 2014) such as «Experiencing Chinese», «Boya Chinese», «Intensive Spoken Chinese», etc. However, because of the complexity of the organization performing these exercises and lack of time during class, the teacher usually ignore these exercises or poorly work them out.

After the analysis of textbooks proposed by the Chinese side, methodologists found the following problem, which is the characteristic for the vast set of benefits: **the simplicity and uniformity of exercises**.

It is logical to assume that an experienced teacher will find the way to compensate the lack of teaching materials in the course by implementing lesson of their own or developed by a third-party. This shortcoming seems to us is been easy to correct and appears in minority of modern textbooks, whereas the most important aim is to build or to compile the system program and highlight principles for the textbook as a whole. In our opinion, during the lesson the teacher also should not use learners' native language too often, and comply with the balance in the language material input in different styles and levels of difficulty. We believe this also includes the lack of adapted teaching materials, that we mentioned before.

The problem of **lack of the system program and selection of learning content**, in our view, holds one of the most important positions in the modern methods of teaching Chinese as a foreign language at the elementary level. Within learning period, both teachers and students should clearly understand the purpose of his or her exercises and findings, even in a particular lesson. The emergence and growth of this problem is undoubtedly the result of the absence of a single national standard and a single set of teaching materials.

Author of numerous teaching Chinese books and courses I.V. Kochergin (2014) also recognizes the existence of certain misbalance in the teaching Chinese language in our country nowadays. According to him, the main problem of Chinese language learning is based on the selection of training content, "the main problem is inverted upside down organization of the learning process. Instead of a logical sequence: job description - curriculum - tutorial, we often have a very incomplete and unspecified qualification characteristics, based more on intuition, subjective vision of the subject than on a scientific basis, the curriculum and in no way affiliated with any first or second course materials" (2014).

A serie of short interviews with teachers of Chinese as a foreign language in high schools and private schools (30 teachers took part) showed that the vast majority of Chinese language teachers (95%) use tutorials and books created by their own or alternative courses, and their choice depends on situations and more or less intuitive (Strukova 2015).

Briefly, we can conclude that describing the overall picture in Russia and abroad, in order to optimize the process of learning Chinese as a second language at the beginners' level in future, there are several ways to solve the problems learners and teachers deal with:

1. To develop and approve the basic requirements to the program to teach Chinese as a foreign language (or adapt already proposed and build up the system program).
2. Create and approve a list of recommended textbooks, modify existing ones and creating new ones.
3. Pay special attention to the balance of materials and the design of oral communicative exercises similar to real life situations.
4. Work on the diversity and complexity of some of the existing materials, and work on the way to adapt them to the teaching process depending on specific goals and learning purposes.

As a part of a renovation plan, while creating new textbooks or tutorials, methodologists have to pay attention to cross-linguistics and cross-culture phenomenon and take in account psycho linguistic issues. In «The new chapter of psycholinguistics» (Gui 2013) in foreign languages give us helpful comments, such as:

1. To experiment with different materials to perform different operations.
2. Generate equivalent Category words.
3. To work with story or situation from different points of view.
4. To use principle of physical respond.
5. To use the nodes, links and connections doctrine.

The current situation with teaching Chinese in Russia is satisfactory, but not perfect at all. Still there are few methodologists (Kochergin 2014) who want to increase the level of teaching Chinese in the schools and universities. They recommend us to take into account different modern ideas and principles, such as:

1. The principle “one difficulty” lesson.
2. Clear learning purpose of study process.
3. A variety of testimonies, exercises and control.
4. Work with the improvement factor.
5. Work according to the target age.
6. Add video materials, color pictures and other multimedia resources.
7. To engage abstract connection while learning new language material.

In fact, for Russians, Chinese is one of the most difficult languages in the world to learn, as for some other countries, and we have a nice opportunity to use comments above to adjust existing methodology and make in more useful, effective and profitable.

In addition, we would like to recommend teachers and methodologists to use the latest achievements of the domestic and abroad methodology of teaching all foreign languages, not only Chinese. Use actively interactive and experimental platforms, share their experience and ideas. Build up connections with the methodologists all around the world to exchange experiences and improve the existing system of teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

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