

Insiders, Outsiders and Inbetweeners: The experiences of exchange teachers promoting Chinese language and culture in Scottish schools

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Abstract: Scotland's '1+2 policy' affords schools the opportunity to support a range of languages and, within this context, the past decade has seen growth in the teaching of Chinese language and culture (CLC). This is in large part due to the resource offered by Confucius Institutes, supported by both the Scottish and Chinese Governments, particularly in the form of visiting Chinese exchange teachers (formally often known as 'Hanban teachers') who come to work in the host system for up to 2 years. As part of a larger doctoral study into the teaching of Chinese culture through a third language programme in Scottish primary schools, this paper considers data gathered from qualitative interviews to explore the experiences of two representative groups of these teachers during their time in the country. It contributes a Scottish perspective to existing literature and reflects upon the various roles and positions that these teachers adopt in trying to make sense of their time in classrooms and education systems different from their own. Though focused on CLC provision, the discussion has wider crossover beyond this to other visiting groups supporting various languages in Scotland.

Keywords: Chinese language and culture, exchange teachers, L3 practices, Scottish '1+2 policy'

Introduction

The background to this paper was my wider exploration of the promotion of Chinese culture at the P5-7 stages in selected Scottish primary schools as part of the broader learning of Chinese language through a third (L3) experience within the parameters of the Scottish '1+2 policy' and relevant curriculum guidance (Education Scotland, 2019; Scottish Government, 2012). As such, the paper draws upon data and analysis from my doctoral thesis (Roxburgh, 2021) which gives insights into classroom practices, compares and contrasts various stakeholders' views and considers the impact of this work on learners' understanding and perceptions of China, its people and its culture(s).

One key group of stakeholders involved in the study were visiting Chinese exchange teachers (referred to from now on as CETs), supported by both the Chinese Government through the former Hanban Organisation, in part replaced by the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation, and the Scottish Government to spend up to 2 years working in Scotland to assist the delivery of Chinese language and culture (CLC). Their involvement is managed through the Confucius Institute for Scotland's Schools (CISS) and a network of Confucius Hubs and Classrooms based in associated secondary and primary schools. The role of these teachers in supporting practices in schools is fundamental to L3 delivery given their native language and cultural competences. This is

even more the case when considering the particularly strong messages that came out from the Scottish teachers involved in my study in terms of both their perceived and real lack of confidence, knowledge and awareness to deliver CLC by themselves which most often placed the success of L3 programmes on the shoulders of these visiting groups (Roxburgh, 2021).

The experiences of CETs in the UK continue to be considered within a small, but growing literature base, and this paper is helpful in that it looks specifically at the Scottish context which has been very underrepresented in discussions of CLC practices to date. When compared with other participant groups in this study, these visiting teachers have a broader range of identities to reconcile in being Chinese nationals, foreign teachers working in school systems very different from their own and seen very much as the 'experts' in the field of CLC from others' perspectives. Qualitative data from interview discussions highlight tensions and competing identities which sees these groups positioned potentially as being 'insiders', 'outsiders' and 'inbetweeners' in terms of cultural beliefs, professional abilities as teachers and their interactions with colleagues and learners in Scottish schools as represented in the figure below.

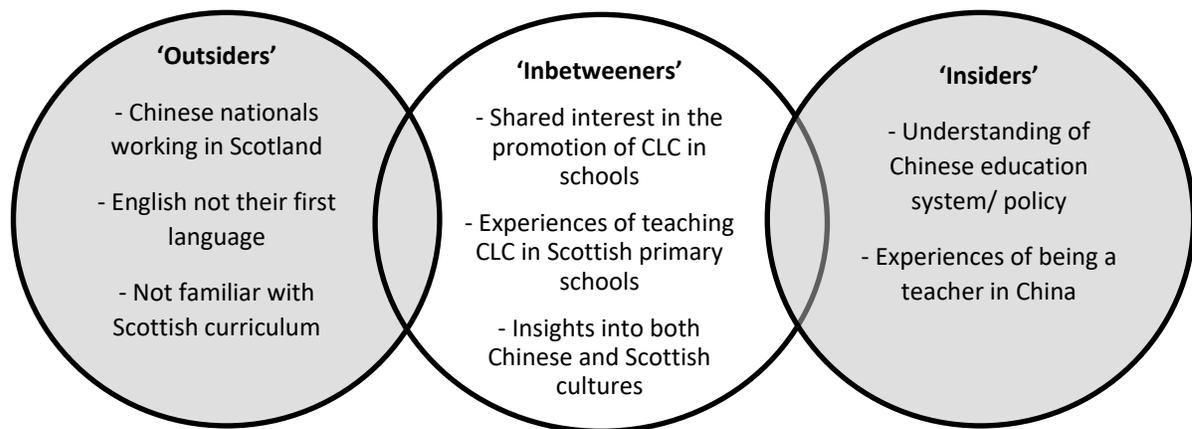


Figure 1: Consideration of the CETs' identities and positionalities in delivering CLC in Scottish primary schools

These experiences, and the resultant tensions, are explored in this paper with some thoughts given on the ways forward.

Wider research context

CLC practices and resourcing in UK mainstream schools are often reliant on assistance from Confucius Institutes (CIs) and the visiting teachers working in schools are a visible manifestation of this support. Though small scale, and often based in secondary school contexts, there are some studies available that offer reflections on CETs' experiences,

perceptions and attitudes on teaching in British classrooms. These are then compared with those involved in my study in the Scottish context (Roxburgh, 2021) with a few themes presented later in Section 5.

An important theme addressed in the literature is these teachers own sense of 'professional self' and how this conflicted, at times, with the expectations of others with whom they worked. Xiang (2019) reports the frustration of her interviewees on what CLC was supposed to achieve: at one level maximum exposure of the language was expected by Hanban as the sponsor of these teachers; whilst the reality in the local context of the schools in which they worked was more focused on small groups of learners to satisfy requirements for national examinations. Pérez-Milans (2015) shares examples where these teachers were underused during their time in schools to promote cultural activity with the focus on 'fun' e.g., lunch time and after school clubs. The reported dynamic between CETs and 'registered' teachers of Chinese meant that the visiting groups often felt underused and were allocated minor tasks which made them feel sidelined. Indeed, when trying to negotiate more meaningful involvement, there was, at times, resistance from the main teacher of Chinese which further emphasised the divide in perceptions of roles.

Another common theme in related research is the philosophical and practical differences in teaching pedagogy adopted in Chinese and UK classrooms (Lu, Zheng and Lin, 2019). This was framed by the visiting teachers as the tension between simply imparting knowledge or motivating interest and engagement. Ye and Edwards (2017) highlight the various types of classes that these visiting teachers taught: some for exam purposes and others optional where the interest level in the subject varied greatly and was compounded further by the learners' age range, motivations for the subject, learning styles etc. This contrasted greatly with the visiting teachers' experiences in China and their own ability to be creative and adaptable. Yang (2019) highlights that some of these teachers felt this sort of adaption of practice was hard to achieve in the short period that they were in the UK and created challenges around what was meant by 'authentic' ways of teaching CLC. For example, some interviewees were unhappy about methods such as overreliance on Pinyin (the standard system of Romanised spelling for Chinese sounds), rather than teaching Chinese characters. They also expressed views that expected UK learners to be motivated by the virtue of hard work in ways that reflected their experience and assumptions in China. In trying to transplant the predominant teaching approaches used in their home country, particularly that of rote learning and the dominance of textbooks, Pérez-Milans (2015) highlights examples of pupil dissatisfaction in lessons that were pitched too high and delivered in a mechanistic style. However, Xiang (2019) counters some of this criticism in highlighting instances where her interviewees cited the lack of available resources, pressures in creating these from scratch and the lack of time to allow these teachers to work with their school mentors. Lu, Zheng and Lin comment on the difficulties faced when working in a system where pupil autonomy and freedom was offered to learners. Visiting

teachers felt that British schools tolerated 'bad behaviour' too much and that they did not receive enough support on how to handle these situations effectively.

One of the keys to success for the work of these groups was the level of support offered by CIs and the host schools. Xiang (2019) sees this as often being patchy, but also reports on good practices where clear remits were set for the visiting groups with planned modelling, observation and team teaching put in place to reinforce expectations. Ideally, this also included inputs from previous Chinese teachers who could talk about the range of experiences and the sorts of approaches that worked well for them. In their 2019 study, Lu Zheng and Liu echoed these findings, reporting times when these visiting groups were teaching in schools where the induction and professional development offered was very limited and thus reinforced perceptions that these teachers were neither part of the host school, nor particularly welcomed.

Method of data gathering in this study

This consisted of qualitative interviews undertaken with two separate focus groups, each over two different school years. In total, 11 CETs participated, representing work in several different Scottish local authorities. The literature around 'ethical participation' considers themes such as interviewing those from other cultures and Birks, Chapman and Francis (2007: 151- 153) identify three broad areas requiring attention:

- **researcher-specific factors:** interviewing skills, preparedness, knowledge of culture and environment, ability to establish rapport, communication skills and control of process;
- **participant- specific factors:** level of anxiety, English proficiency, desire to please; and
- **context-specific factors:** location, time, cultural norms and ethical processes.

In summary, the approach adopted was to conduct two focus group interviews; one in English with me acting as interviewer and a second using a Chinese national studying to become a teacher of CLC at Strathclyde University and who was also a former exchange teacher. As Holmes et al. (2013: 294) state, "If researchers are working monolingually, then the data would only tell a half-truth. Thus, the demands of researching multilingually are rewarded in the richness of insights generated." Such an approach helped examine the notion of power dynamics, an often cited ethical issue, in considering to what extent the interactions between interviewer and interviewee are impacted by notions of status and role as cultural outsiders and insiders. For those interested, this is explored further in my full thesis (Roxburgh, 2021), rather than in this short paper.

The questions asked on both occasions remained the same but were translated into English and Chinese and sent on in advance. Though often reflecting more on their experiences in secondary schools, rather than the primary school context of my research, the views expressed still showed important thinking around their

understanding and attitudes shaping their identities and classroom practices in both contexts. The questions posed at interview included consideration of:

- The rationale for the promotion of CLC in schools;
- The views of stakeholders' experiences of CLC (CETs, Scottish teachers and learners at Primary 5-7)
- The support given/ available to assist CLC; and
- The factors supporting/ hindering the delivery of CLC in schools.

Analysis

The qualitative data gathered was explored in line with the broad principles of thematic analysis advocated by Braun and Clarke (2022). In considering how a 'theme' develops, my analysis considered the following guidance:

- A theme encapsulates patterns of meaning and relevance across the data linking back to the research question.
- The relevance of one theme against another is not based simply on the number of reported instances or to the amount of attention given in the data.
- The researcher's judgement, based on all the knowledge available, should determine a theme.
- The core of a theme need not always be based on quantifiable measures, but the extent to which it clearly links to the research question.

Discussion of results

From the fuller account given in my thesis, I have drawn upon a few examples that try to highlight the various roles and identities that the CETs took on during their time in Scottish schools and the resultant tensions.

a) Insiders: Promoting China as the 'cultural experts'

Reflections on their Chinese identity, and the elements of this that were felt important for non-Chinese people's awareness of its cultural aspects, was a central theme given that CETs were essentially in charge of interpreting this for those studying CLC in Scottish classrooms. Views expressed around the importance attached to promoting Chinese tradition, history and societal values were often emphasised. The group, however, recognised that they had to also consider how these crossed over into UK/ Scottish classrooms. In trying to make the promotion of CLC balanced and meaningful to pupils in schools, inclusion of the modern side of China and easily accessible elements such as its food culture were mentioned as ways to gain learners' interest and apply classroom learning to real life. Representative comments included:

Food is a good topic for outdoor learning and pupils are taken to Chinese restaurants and supermarkets to learn about authentic Chinese food. (CET 2)

Modern culture is more interesting and better reflects our current lives. (CET 6)

Some pupils have been taught Chinese painting, Kung Fu and Tai Chi and are very interested, but I still prefer to teach something that is relevant to their everyday life. (CET 9)

Food culture, specifically that of drinking culture, also gave insights into both China and Scotland for the group. The CETs' views here developed with experience and interaction with their host society:

In Scotland, tea is a social occasion to talk and drink. Tea culture in China in daily life can be an individual activity, a symbol of a healthy lifestyle. Wider drinking culture here often seems the opposite. (CET 7)

In China, drinking culture values the human at the centre, the person comes first and drinking second. In Scotland, people value the alcohol itself more than the person. (CET 11)

When considering similarities between both countries, the visiting groups had less to say, but did return a lot to notions of celebrating festivals and the central role of the family, particularly on special occasions:

No matter for Chinese or Scottish people, they will come back home to have a family meal to celebrate together. (CET 7)

Reflections also included the CETs' frustrations on the stereotyping of life in China and its culture and they saw their role in countering this as being important. Again, most of these views related to experiences in secondary school contexts:

Views in some classes can be quite stereotypical: Chinese people are all good cooks, not very friendly, over-disciplined and that seems a general view in some places. It can annoy me at times. (CET 6)

In classes, some children thought that pandas are kept as pets and some asked whether they can be adopted. I almost laughed when I heard that. (CET 11)

b) Inbetweeners: Being teachers in China and Scotland

With most, though not all, CETs having professional teaching experience in China to draw upon, their identity provided room for reflection on applying such knowledge and skills in the Scottish context.

Linking back to the earlier summary of literature, the interviewees raised issues round the 'types of learners' with whom they worked and how this reflected the purpose(s) of studying CLC. In the CETs' minds, there were differences between those who had selected to learn Chinese and those for whom it was compulsory:

In another Confucius Hub school, there are also different types of learners: one group who are interested, another group who misbehave, but still expect to get the credits. (CET 1)

Exam classes are more enthusiastic. (CET 2)

The most important reason is why pupils choose the language and whether they choose it by themselves. (CET 7)

Again, links are seen between the views expressed here and the earlier mentioned research which discussed motivation, achievement and behaviour as key differences in the education systems of both countries. This presented real challenges for the CETs working in Scottish classrooms, thus reinforcing the ‘inbetweeners’ dynamic.

Beyond what was happening in schools, external factors also played a part in influencing learners to take forward CLC. Some CETs highlighted that a few children came from Chinese cultural family backgrounds where learning the language was an expectation, though not always popular:

There is a third group whose family background is Chinese, so parents force them to go to classes to keep up the language. The child may not wish to learn Mandarin, but their family asks them to do so. (CET 2)

Earlier reflections by Yang (2019), Ye and Edwards (2017) considered the philosophy of classroom practices by such visiting teacher groups, and this arose also in this study. In both interviews, the CETs tended to place their contributions to learning in the background and had to be reminded of the important and distinct position they had in influencing the success of CLC in schools. In doing so, this raised tensions in some minds:

We can make both a positive and negative contribution if pupils are not used to our sort of teaching. (CET 2)

It is hard at times for us to be creative and keep learners’ interest. (CET 7)

The CET’s personality and cultural knowledge are also equally important. (CET 9)

c) Outsiders: Making sense of expectations and roles

This final discussion considers some of the difficulties faced by the visiting teachers in establishing and undertaking their professional role in Scottish schools. Being flexible and adaptive to different learners’ needs was highlighted by Ye and Edwards (2018) and also raised in my study. Being able to teach across the continuum of both primary and secondary levels was new for many in the group, but also recognised as valuable:

The Confucius Institute should find something practical and simple enough to deliver in primary schools. It is difficult for us to achieve this. (CET 5)

Different pupils have different requirements, some love Chinese and want to learn more, others learn because they have no choice. Regardless, we need to cater for everyone, and this is a challenge. (CET 10)

Both groups of interviewees were keen to reflect on the nature of support they had received before coming to Scotland, on arrival and once based in their host schools. Activities organised in China by Hanban tended to focus on the delivery of CLC in traditional ways, with occasional use of foreign academics to supplement such inputs. Though CETs mentioned their own teaching backgrounds and support from other groups who had been to the UK, there was a view that they were not as prepared for

the daily life and professional challenges they met in Scotland as much as they would have liked:

Courses in China taught us about Chinese calligraphy, papercutting, and Chinese knots. (CET 1)

There is not enough on the cultural dimension or how to communicate effectively with school colleagues. (CET 2)

The training received in China is for all the teachers travelling to the UK, rather than reference to the four countries. It is not specific enough for all systems. (CET 3)

Video chats with CETs who were already here and talked about the differences in the systems were really good. (CET 7)

As mentioned earlier by Xiang (2019), there was a recognition of the difficulties that the CETs faced, particularly round that of expectations from schools and the Hanban organisation as sponsor of such exchanges. In my study, this was echoed by mentoring staff such as CISS Professional Development Officers (PDOs) who saw the impact of such challenges firsthand:

It would be great if the Hanban organisation would sit down with us and develop materials that could be used locally by our CETs. (PDO 1)

The CET has to be a skilled person who can pick up the pieces to avoid pupils disliking the language at an early stage. However, school staff really need to play their full part too in the support process. (PDO 2)

Some CETs shared experiences of how things have been difficult for them. It is a big thing for Chinese teachers to say that they cannot cope. (PDO 2)

The need for planned and sustained professional development was mentioned earlier by Ye and Edwards (2018). The CETs interviewed in my study appreciated support received from CISS and the ways in which this helped them to tune into the Scottish context. However, this was not always matched by the support offered in the host schools:

The problem is that the classes focus too much on cultural information giving. Though this might be interesting, we need support from schools to make it more practical. (CET 1)

School roles get in the way of supporting the CETs efficiently during the school working day. (CET 2)

There are lots of resources and materials from Hanban. However, these are developed for use around the world, which often means that they are not specific enough for use here in Scotland and what we have is limited. (CET 9)

Finally, in the literature summary, Xiang (2019) discussed some of the tensions raised by Chinese teacher groups in the UK over expectations of their teaching, those round learners' progress and how this was best achieved in practice. CET groups interviewed in

my study mentioned similar factors such as curriculum policy and delivery, over which they had very little control, but that impacted on how they could manage their teaching and learning, often negatively. CETs expressed frustration as they knew what was being delivered could achieve more:

Pupils may want to learn Mandarin, but don't have enough class time and then see it as a waste of time as a result. (CET 3)

Another factor contributing to positive/ negative views is the number of classes, one primary school I worked in had Mandarin once a term. That is just pointless to me. (CET 7).

Conclusions

As mentioned at the outset, the use of CETs is essentially the fundamental basis for the delivery of CLC in Scottish schools and, in many ways, is how it will be maintained for the foreseeable future. Though the two focus groups were small, the geographical spread of these teachers offers an insight that is likely broadly representative of those working across Scotland. Therefore, the views expressed, and the analysis of the underlying themes, highlights lessons to be learned in terms of how best to use this indispensable human resource. In conclusion, the following points arise for further consideration by those involved in supporting the work of such visiting groups in Scottish schools:

- Revisit the remits of Scottish and CETs in jointly promoting CLC to better balance expectations towards successful outcomes and practices;
- Consider a reallocation of time instead to activities in the primary sector where the build up of CLC could support positive attitudes when pupils move into secondary contexts;
- Open up more professional activities and dialogue at school, local and national levels that encourage meaningful crossovers of Chinese and Scottish cultures through curriculum delivery;
- Consider how best to support visiting teachers before, during and after their time in the specific context of Scottish education; and
- Carry out further voiced research in this area with visiting teacher groups to show their contributions to CLC practices are indeed valued.

Reflecting upon these points brings us back to the various identities and positions adopted by such visiting teachers during their time in schools, beyond just the context of supporting CLC as presented in this paper. Such visiting groups, regardless of the target language, need to be fully recognised as a valuable resource who come with a range of worthwhile perspectives. Removing the artificial boundaries of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' to instead see all stakeholders meeting in the middle would be the most productive place to learn from and successfully take forward such initiatives in Scottish schools.

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