

## Working together to train tomorrow's teachers of Chinese

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**Abstract:** In the context of Scotland's strategy for language and curriculum for excellence, the rise of Mandarin Chinese as a language of study seems assured. However, the supply of teachers of Chinese who can teach effectively in primary contexts is uncertain, and the use of native speaking teachers and language assistants continues to present challenges. This paper reports on a project involving the training of primary teachers who are able to teach beginner Chinese in England. The paper focuses on the innovative partnership of a Language Expert Teacher and a Native Speaker Teacher, working together to train teachers in both language and pedagogy. The experience raised questions about pedagogy for both the native speaker and language expert teachers which may have wider implications for the teaching of Chinese in schools.

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**Keywords:** Teacher Language; Language Teacher Education; Chinese Language Teaching; Target Language; Primary Languages; team-teaching; language teaching pedagogy

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### Introduction

*Learning French, German, Italian and Spanish will continue to have an important place. There is, however, also a case to be made for taking account of new economies of the future, as Scotland has already started to do by encouraging the promotion of Chinese. (Scottish Government, 2012: 12)*

The introduction of the 1+2 languages model in the Scottish strategy, in line with the European Parliament's Action Plan 2004-2006 which advocated 'mother tongue plus two other languages' (Commission of the European Communities, 2003:7), offers the potential for more children to do Chinese as a second (L2) or third (L3) language. However, teacher supply and teacher training for Chinese language teaching (CLT) have been identified as significant barriers to the successful teaching of Chinese in Australia (Zhang, 1992), Canada (Duff, 2007) England (CILT, 2007), and the US (Duff, 2007).

The supply of effective teachers of Chinese is particularly challenging in the primary school context. Recent research into primary languages teaching (McLachlan, 2009; Cable et al, 2010) recognised a number of possible models for teaching languages in the primary school, but recommended that the optimum position would be for class teachers in the primary school to do language teaching as an integrated, high status part of the primary curriculum (Powell et al, 2000; Driscoll, 2004a and 2004b; Mujis, 2012). Cable et al (2010) found that schools had an expectation that training for teachers would become an integral part of initial (pre-service) teacher education. However, this is likely to challenge the language capabilities of primary teachers where there is reason to

suspect that few of them are likely to have the knowledge of Chinese desirable to support a 1+2 curriculum.

At the University of Warwick, all primary PGCE trainee teachers were expected to learn a language to some level during their training year and, as part of the generalist training, undertook a programme of language training which involved eight lectures, six pedagogy workshops, twenty hours of language instruction and observation of language teaching in schools, funded by the Teacher Development Agency. The language training element of the programme was taught by a Language Expert Teacher (LET) and a Native Speaker Teacher (NST) working together. In this article we will share some of insights about some of the ways they worked together and the issues which were identified from a series of eight observations of teaching, plus eight observations of planning meetings and interviews with both members of this partnership.

### ***The difficulties facing native speakers***

The report to the Scottish Government proposes that Foreign Language Assistants (FLAs) and other native speakers play an important role in the implementation of the 1+2 approach (Scottish Government, 2012: 33), after appropriate training. This is an important point, since native speaker as teachers and FLAs face a range of linguistic, pedagogical and cultural challenges which may make it difficult for them to teach languages successfully in schools (Whitehead and Taylor, 2000).

The term “Chinese” does not necessarily signify a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese, as this is a standard which, although ubiquitous in PRC, may not be the speaker’s first language and may leave native speakers uncomfortable (Wang, 2011). Chinese speakers from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore or Scottish heritage with Chinese backgrounds may not have familiarity with either simplified characters or the pinyin form of Romanisation which are now widely used to teach Mandarin Chinese to foreigners.

Native speaker status itself does not necessarily confer the metalinguistic awareness or pedagogical authority to teach the language (Zhang, 1992, Kramsch, 1997; Braine, 1999). Moreover, overseas teachers or FLAs will have experienced a schooling or training which may have led them to develop very different beliefs about language and learning. The pre-service experiences of education that trained language teachers will have had are likely to shape their expectations of teaching and behaviours, and this has been well established in both EFL and CFL teaching (Duff, 2007). The discrepancy between pupil and teacher expectations of teaching and learning can be a serious barrier to learning. In England, a fairly recent CILT report about the teaching of Mandarin highlighted some of the issues:

Teachers from China are described as “lovely” but their lack of familiarity with the English system of discipline; target setting etc. is a problem. They also tend to have a different, perhaps unrealistic, expectation of pupils.” (CILT, 2007:12)

This is not surprising, given that teachers from China come face to face with differing traditions, values, beliefs and expectations that problematize teaching and learning

(Thorp, 1991). To address this issue in our project both the LET and the NST prepared carefully to teach the trainee teachers. In addition to learning some Chinese, the LET learnt about Chinese language and culture and visited China. The NST visited local primary schools and undertook an MA module about language pedagogy in English schools. Their partnership was successful in terms of student learning. All the trainee primary school teachers they taught rated their levels of satisfaction with the language teaching highly and also recorded significant improvements in their language skills and confidence at teaching languages, even trainees who had expressed bad prior experiences with language learning in school. All trainees stated that they felt confident to plan and teach Mandarin in their final teaching placement. At the end of the programme, two of the trainees undertook summer courses to continue their Chinese learning. Against this context a number of interesting themes were identified in the observations and interviews, which are discussed below.

## **The study**

This study aimed to examine how the two teachers worked together to co-teach the programme. As the study developed, focused questions about target language, activities and intercultural understanding also emerged.

To explore these issues, we observed eight of the fourteen language teaching sessions, using audio-recording and rich field notes. In addition, the study included semi-structured interviews with the two teachers three times during the programme and observation and noting of 8 planning meetings. The analysis of the observations involved listening to the recordings to check detail in the field notes and noting the use of both English (L1) and Chinese (target language) during the session. In addition, the target language was tagged into functional categories to place the emphasis on how the teachers used it, rather than the quantity. Key themes were identified in the planning sessions and interviews and these themes explored in the observations.

### ***Co-teaching and co-coaching***

In the early planning sessions the LET and NST divided the teaching activities between them, as they worked together to design lessons to address the objectives they had agreed. Initially, the NST focused on language elements while the LET suggested and taught activities with an intercultural or group focus. However, as the sessions proceeded, the initial distinctions became blurred and they worked increasingly closely, sharing introductions and conclusions of sessions and helping each other by scribing responses, displaying character cards, distributing resources, working with groups and even prompting each other's language. The LET began to introduce characters and practise pinyin as the NST became more involved in culturally focused activities like storytelling. They achieved a very close partnership which showed in both planning and teaching. This was very marked in the use of the Chinese language in the teaching. The NST taught the LET vocabulary for the sessions and LET began to use it flexibly through the sessions to identify and cue many more opportunities to use the target vocabulary to begin pushing the trainees to develop an inter-language- a personal linguistic system

which, whilst not yet a complete or correct use of Chinese at least enables the learner to communicate and understand. Such a use of language may well include (incorrectly) features of the learner's first language, but it is a basis for developing linguistic competence and experience in the target language. By developing their use of Chinese classroom vocabulary for routines, instructions and basic questions, the trainees began to develop a language for communication and, thereby, increase their experience of language use.

In this co-teaching situation, the transfer of knowledge and skills worked both ways, as the LET taught the NST new teaching activities for the sessions - telling stories with a limited vocabulary, managing group activities, using flashcards, games and songs. The NST commented that "I was surprised that a university lecturer would do this sort of thing but it is fun for the trainees. But the fun activities do take a lot of time and they must practice more pinyin and characters. I am not sure fun tasks are efficient. "

### ***Target language***

The NSTs and LETs agreed about the importance of using the target language in language teaching session, modelling this to the trainees, based on their discussions about how they wanted to teach the classes. However, the target language they actually used was surprising. The NST struggled to use a restricted vocabulary which the trainees could access and learn and in most lessons, especially the early stages. She translated into English almost every time she used the target language. The NST reflected that "this happens in English classes in China, in my experience of teaching Chinese to foreigners. It is normal. It is for efficiency because it saves time to use for learning." There was a real tension for her between students' understanding and her perceived time pressure, whereas the LET saw the use of the target language as a key goal of the programme "modelling Chinese for managing, things like 'shang ke' (start class), helps increase students functional listening vocabulary. I think I am learning".

The NST also found the use of the target language for behaviour management, praise and positive correction awkward:

*I am not used to it. These are trainee teachers but they get excited in fun activities - in the groups things especially. They do not notice the teacher and I have to call them. If I call them in Chinese they may not understand and it will take longer. It is not something I have considered before.*

The LET was used to the idea of the teacher managing class behaviour and was more concerned to know a number of ways to do this in Chinese.

### ***Practice and homework***

Despite shared planning both teachers realised they had different expectations about how trainees would practise language and what sort of homework they should do. The class activities included the type of activities trainees might use in primary schools: warm ups, games, making and painting characters and culturally-focused activities such

as making dumplings, learning festival rhymes and songs and acting out stories. The LET saw these activities as important contexts for the use of the language elements of the programme but the NST was concerned about the lack of class practice of pinyin, character and phrase recognition and memorisation. Where the LET saw the class activities as the main contexts for practising use of language, the NST felt too much partner and group work used time which would have been better spent doing structured practice of, say, pinyin, character memorisation or stroke order, or learning sentences. For the NST, group work and paired activities had valuable motivating properties but were “not efficient”. At the same time the NST noted

*I have never considered doing more than a word or two whole class recitation or flashcards because how would I know if they did it wrong? But I think a little each lesson is vital with Chinese because of the memory load.*

The NST was surprised that the trainees did not expect automatically to prepare and revise lesson materials or to memorise characters and pinyin encountered. When she realised this, she spent time teaching the trainees (and the LET) how to memorise characters and pinyin. The LET was impressed by the memorisation strategies involved, which she would not have taught as directly or intensively. The LET saw homework set each week for trainees as practice and consolidation of vocabulary and, in addition, set tasks which might be used in a primary school context- selecting Chinese names, preparing a calendar, making number cards and teaching greeting to colleagues, research about the culture. The NST found these activities “good for motivation” but had reservations about the use of trainees’ time, which she felt would be better spent on memorisation of language elements: “Chinese children do not expect fun things in class.” They work hard” and “fun things take a lot of time”. The NST was restrained in expressing her reservations. “Chinese children would not understand why this is a good thing...” and “It is a fun thing but takes a lot of time” ...“It is not really working at language”.

The co-operation between a Chinese NST and LET has raised some important questions about memorisation and the culture of practice in primary schools language learning in England. One key question arising from the partnership was whether it is possible for children to learn Chinese (and to a lesser extent other languages) without some sort of regular out-of-class learning of language elements. This is culturally difficult in English schools, where the main activity involving any regular out-of-school practice is reading with parents. The issue raises additional questions about the role of parents in supporting their children’s homework and education.

Both teachers had positive but different views on the role of intercultural understanding. The NST found this highly desirable in case the trainees ever visited China whilst the LET believed intercultural activities were intended to get the trainees to understand not just China but also their own habits, patterns and assumptions. The NST did mention “it is not assessed in China, after all”.

## ***The impact of experience***

The issues discussed above are related to the expectations of both teachers, based on their experiences as teachers, trainers, as former pupils themselves and on their cultural backgrounds. The teachers in this project are likely to have had different experiences of the teacher role in childhood, teacher training, teaching, and in their research. In a teacher-centred and knowledge-based Confucian model, teachers have been perceived to be the source and authority of knowledge (Liu, 1986; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). The Chinese reverence for the teacher as an authority and teaching as a performance contrasts strongly with the concentration on the individual and the nurturing of personal learning which dominates much of primary education in England (Woodrow & Sham, 2001) and elsewhere in the UK.

In cultural terms, Cortazzi and Jin (1996) write of a Chinese culture of learning which values rote learning and collective effort rather than individual responsibility. Use of memorisation and rote learning is the main learning method for Chinese students (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991). This learning strategy is commonly based on Confucian heritage cultures and may also be related to the demands of the Chinese language, which involves memorising characters with little phonological link to pronunciation. Rote-learning and memorisation are deemed to be a serious endeavour that eventually, if pursued rigorously enough, will lead to successful learning (Liu, 1986; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). This is a contrast with the particular version of communicative language teaching represented in English classrooms (Block, 2001, 2005). It also applies to primary languages teaching, where value is placed on student-centred acquisition of language skills with teachers being helpers, facilitators, observers and participants in the classroom (Ellis, 1996; Harmer, 2001).

## **Conclusion**

In this project a native speaker teacher and language expert teacher worked together successfully, coaching and supporting each other. Nevertheless, it became clear that, despite extensive preparation and discussion of approaches to language teaching, the “folk pedagogy” of teaching (Olson and Bruner, 1996) for each of these teachers was different. Planning of objectives and pedagogy over many weeks raised conflicts with both teachers’ experiences as well as forcing both teachers to ask themselves questions about what they saw as good language teaching. This experience raised questions for the LET about how primary children are to learn Chinese (or other languages) if all practice and learning is expected to take place within the limited curriculum time of school, and how primary teachers can teach children to undertake effective practice and learning at home. The NST was engaged and enthused by the range of practical, paired tasks which trainees undertook, if not completely convinced that they were “efficient”, and she developed a greater awareness of the potential for the use of the target language in a focused way as an important goal in classes. This study suggests that native speaker and language expert teachers can work very productively together and learn from each other, and that such an experience leaves a mark on the beliefs, assumptions and practices of both. We believe that developing such collaborations is a positive step towards addressing the teacher supply issues surrounding Chinese.

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