Issues in Mandarin language instruction: theory, research, and practice

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Abstract

This article reports on an exploratory study of instructional issues encountered in the teaching of Mandarin as a foreign language at the university level. The research reveals the sometimes conflicting views held by teachers, researchers, students, and institutions with respect to instructional methods and types of classroom interaction, particularly in the context of form-focused instruction. Data come from regular, recorded classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews with one teacher and her students over the period of one semester. Findings revealed that, whereas the teacher was committed to providing opportunities for peer interaction and practice and not providing excessive error correction, repetition, or modeling, students on the other hand expressed strong views about the desirability of having less peer interaction rather than more, and conversely, more error correction, repetition, and modeling. The article concludes that further classroom research in non-European language courses is necessary to examine more closely the applicability of findings from previous studies involving primarily European languages and the cognitive and sociocultural basis for students’ views, and how and why those views change over time.

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Keywords: Mandarin instruction; Error correction; Affect; Interaction; Repetition; Focus on form; Classroom research; Teacher’s knowledge; Professional development

We thank our research participants for their involvement in the study, and also the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions. Because of space restrictions, most of our examples and excerpts have had to be cut but we hope that our main points are still clear.

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1. Introduction

Reconciling conflicting perspectives regarding instructional practices in their classrooms is one of the many challenges language teachers face. Research communities recommend certain approaches to teaching a foreign language (FL) or sometimes produce contradictory recommendations or alternatives regarding particular teaching methods, based on mixed findings across studies. Teachers then wrestle with the interpretation and application of these research-based prescriptions in their own instructional contexts, which have their own histories and cultures (Freeman and Richards, 1996; Freeman and Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 1999; Tse, 2000). They must therefore negotiate a complex range of social, institutional, and epistemological factors in order to be effective and successful in their classrooms (see Fig. 1).

Traditionally, research in FL classes has focused on the teaching and learning of reading and writing skills, vocabulary, and grammar, especially within a communicative or content-based curricular context; developmental orders in the acquisition of grammatical structures; task-based instruction and learning; the assessment of FL proficiency; and the effectiveness of computer-mediated language learning (Byrnes, 1998; Doughty and Williams, 1998; Hadley, 2001; Hall, 2001; Lightbown, 2000;...
Long and Robinson, 1998; Pica, 2000). Less research has examined the basis for teachers’ practices or students’ responses to those practices, although a growing number of studies investigate teachers’ decision-making processes, socialization, and apprenticeship from sociocognitive and sociocultural perspectives (e.g., Almarza, 1996; Bailey and Nunan, 1996; Duff and Uchida, 1997; Freeman and Richards, 1996; Woods, 1996; van Lier, 1996), and students’ beliefs and learning experiences, revealed through diaries and other introspective or retrospective reports (Bailey, 1983; Barkhuizen, 1998; de Courcy, 2002; Schmidt and F rota, 1986; Schumann, 1997; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000).

Therefore, there are gaps in knowledge about what transpires in FL classrooms and what effect it has on learning. This is particularly true in the case of non-European language classes. Although university classes of the East Asian languages Korean, Japanese, and Mandarin are enjoying considerable growth across North American campuses, as well as in Australia, relatively little research has been conducted on classroom instruction or interaction within Asian FL classes specifically (Ohta, 2001, and de Courcy, 2002, being two exceptions) and there are few specialized textbooks on classroom research or teaching methods for these languages. The majority of existing English-medium publications on FL education deal primarily with English, French, Spanish, and German (e.g., Brown, 2000, Hadley, 2001). There are also fundamental questions to be answered regarding the applicability of findings based primarily on the teaching and learning of English as a second language (L2), with relatively advanced, L2-literate adult learners already enrolled in English-medium universities, to students at lower-proficiency levels learning languages typologically unrelated to English with very different grammatical, phonological, orthographic, and cultural systems (Kubota, 1998).

This article presents an exploratory study of instruction and interaction in a university-level Mandarin language course. As co-researchers in the project, we addressed the following research questions: What instructional issues or tensions related to classroom processes, such as forms of interaction and corrective feedback, are found in this Mandarin course? And what are the perspectives of the teacher, students, and published theory and research with respect to these same issues? Our analysis here is restricted to: (1) the role of form-focused, accuracy-oriented activity vs. more communicative, fluency-oriented pair/group practice; (2) focus on form through grammar presentation, explanation, and practice; and (3) error correction.

2. The study

2.1. Context

The instructional context for this research was a rigorous first-year Mandarin FL course at a large American university. The course was the first in a series of semester-long courses. The students in this class all had previous experience learning Chinese,
either formally or informally. Some had taken Chinese in high school, Saturday school, or in summer courses, whereas others had been exposed to Cantonese or another variety of Chinese with family members or relatives but they were not fluent in Mandarin. They were therefore not placed in the parallel section for true beginners or in another first year course for heritage language learners with reasonably fluent oral proficiency but undeveloped L2 literacy skills. Approximately half of the 19 students were undergraduate students from ethnic-Chinese backgrounds; the other half comprised a mixture of European–American undergraduate and graduate students. About a third of the students were majors or aspiring majors in East Asian studies. All the students appeared to be highly motivated to succeed in the course for a variety of personal and professional reasons.

2.2. Research methods

Standard qualitative research methods were employed (e.g., Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) to address the central research questions. The researchers were (participant) observers who attended classes for the duration of the 3.5 month semester with the informed consent of the department, the teacher, and all the students.1 The class was audiotaped at least once each week, producing approximately 22 h of recorded data. Thirteen students, representing a mixture of males and females, also agreed to take part in interviews. Observations and interviews were audiorecorded and later transcribed. Apart from these occasions, the researchers chatted with the students and teacher before or after class or during the break. The study was not an evaluation of the teacher or course, nor was it designed to provide a causal explanation about the effect of certain teaching practices on students’ learning outcomes.

2.3. The instructor and course

The course instructor, Jin (a pseudonym), had taught Mandarin at the university level for several years and was considered by students and colleagues to be enthusiastic and effective. Having recently completed graduate studies in applied linguistics, Jin also welcomed the opportunity to reflect on her own instructional practices. Her teaching philosophy, as she explained it, was integrative, constructivist, and communicative. The course met three times per week for 1.5 h each lesson. It was a very demanding five-credit, four-skill course for students who in most cases were taking four other courses concurrently. In many ways, it was typical of first-year FL courses in non-European language programs at North American universities, which generally require that students take a certain number of such language courses to fulfil a FL requirement. The first year students in this course had the demanding tasks of mastering pronunciation, including tones and

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1 The first author has an intermediate-level knowledge of spoken Mandarin but limited L2 literacy. The second author is fluent in Mandarin and two other varieties of Chinese.
tone combinations, learning to read and write using the romanized pinyin writing system, with tone markings, and a large number of traditional characters, as well as covering the basic grammatical patterns and some 400 vocabulary items in the textbook, *Colloquial Chinese* (T’ung, 1982). All of this was to take place in one semester, following a schedule shared by all sections of this multi-section course. Covering all that was mandated within the allotted timeframe in a satisfactory way also required meticulous organization skills on the part of the teacher. Daily written homework exercises of various types and dictation quizzes were assigned, collected, corrected and returned promptly, usually the following day. After every two textbook lessons (4–5 classroom sessions), the same test was given to all sections of the course and, in addition to classroom lessons, students were occasionally asked to create and perform dialogs in pairs, audiorecord oral assignments or write short compositions about themselves, attend weekly tutorial practice sessions, and listen to audiotapes.

3. Results: emerging themes and issues

Themes that emerged from observations, questionnaires, interviews, and from the teacher’s ongoing reflections revealed the extent to which the teacher and students were negotiating the curriculum, the nature of classroom interaction, the emphasis on accuracy vs. fluency and pattern practice vs. creative construction, and the affective climate in the classroom. All of these topics have been addressed in much other current research as well but with different languages (e.g., Gass, 1997; Hall, 2001; Hall and Verplaetse, 2000; van Lier, 1996).

3.1. Fostering a focus on form, linguistic interaction, and a positive affective climate

3.1.1. Pair work vs. teacher-fronted instruction and practice

The discourse in the Mandarin classes revealed instructional sequences by the teacher, including presentation of new material, opportunities for repetition and interaction, and questions from students. In addition to typical teacher-fronted formats, alternative classroom formats and participant structures were used, including students’ pair work and presentations. Jin reported that in first-year courses it was not possible to give students many opportunities to work in pairs or groups, although this is commonly prescribed for both ESL and other FL classes, often in conjunction with communicative or task-based language teaching (e.g., Brown, 1994; Byrnes, 1998; Hadley, 2001; Pica, 2000; Skehan, 1998). Hadley’s (1993) L2 Proficiency approach, for example, developed for the teaching of European languages in America in particular, states that “opportunities must be provided for students to practice in a range of contexts likely to be encountered in the target culture” (p. 79) and “[a] judicious balance of activities that work on communicative skills with those that focus on the development of accuracy seems most sensible” (p. 81). On the other hand, Burns (1998) cites an Australian study “where explicit instruction, involving interactional structure,
direct input, and teacher guidance in the initial stages of gaining new knowledge
of generic and linguistic patterns enhanced learners’ autonomy and their ability to
communicate effectively during less controlled activities” (p. 104). The two per-
spectives are not incompatible but the latter reflects a greater emphasis on formal
presentation and form-focus in earlier stages of instruction, one that has often
been viewed critically by communicative methodologists. This same sort of ten-
sion and response to a perceived new communicative orthodoxy motivated a
special thematic issue of the *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association*
in May, 1994 (see Kubota, 1998, for a brief summary).

The demands and complexity of expedited Mandarin literacy instruction (both
romanized and character-based) and the urgency of having students master pro-
nunciation, tones, and sufficient amounts of vocabulary and grammar before being
left to their own communicative devices weighed heavily in Jin’s decisions about the
use of pair work. In addition, enrolment in the observed term was about 30% greater
than usual, limiting the amount of time available for paired oral presentations and
reporting back to the class. Pair work that was observed usually was limited to 10
min and covered such topics as where the students were from, their likes and dislikes,
favourite activities, and their families. Jin acknowledged the difficulty of promoting
more peer work when required to “rush” through the curriculum and to allocate
more than 90% of course grades to literacy (especially written exams) and only 10%
to orality.

Under this curricular pressure, Jin needed to temper some of her personal beliefs
about grading, error correction, teacher vs. student talk, and grammar instruction as
opposed to more open-ended communicative activities as she planned her lessons.
Moreover, teaching a tonal language with several writing systems (simplified vs.
traditional characters and the romanized *pinyin* system), within a very particular
institutional setting with its own expectations, ideologies, and histories and with a
group of high-achieving students proved different from her recent experiences
teaching ESL at the college level, where the students had more exposure to the L2
both inside and outside of class. As a result, they felt both more need – and more
confidence – to use the L2 in class and to discuss their L2 extracurricular experiences
in class discussions.

Nevertheless, these demands and, above all, the intellect of the students in Jin’s
courses made teaching Mandarin both challenging and rewarding. Yet question-
naires and interviews in a study conducted the previous year (Li, 1999) revealed, to
Jin’s surprise and chagrin, that students did not appreciate pair and group practice
or class presentations to the same extent as the teachers did – although they ac-
nowledged that it was fun to interact with their peers – or as much as they valued
other aspects of the course, such as reviewing the texts, receiving grammar in-
struction and error correction, and practising characters. Jin’s current teaching
practices were thus influenced by these findings regarding students’ preferences
which conflicted somewhat with her own (Duff and Uchida, 1997). As in most
university settings, students’ evaluations are a very important factor in instructors’
reappointment, tenure, or promotion; therefore, responsiveness to students’ needs
and preferences is very important.
Jin’s students were not only wary of peer work but also adamant about the need to hear linguistic modeling from the teacher, not their peers, so as not to learn the wrong tones for key vocabulary items. One highly motivated graduate student went so far as to say that pairwork was potentially “harmful” and “damaging” because it provided students with poor linguistic models. Asked on a questionnaire about the advantages and disadvantages of practicing Mandarin together with a classmate, the 15 respondents acknowledged many positive social, affective, and cognitive aspects of peer work, including opportunities for self- and other-correction and learning, that it was fun, confidence-building, reassuring, and interesting. Their main concerns, however, widely shared among them, were about learning incorrect L2 forms from their peers, constituting a “race to the bottom,” as one student put it, and a source of confusion. This concern about learning one another’s mistakes that is commonly encountered in communicative L2 teaching, while understandable, is not well founded, since there is little published research showing that peer interaction has a negative effect on students’ L2 development (Chaudron, 1988). On the contrary, a few studies demonstrate its benefits (Ohta, 2001; Porter, 1983). For example, Swain’s (2002) ongoing research on collaborative dialogue in French L2 development suggests that students working in pairs come up with accurate L2 forms about 80% of the time, meaning that 20% of the time they potentially learn incorrect forms from each other. However, no known research has examined this issue in the context of Mandarin L2 acquisition. These first-year students were preoccupied with the likely negative effects of being exposed to inaccurate tones, which experienced teachers like Jin concede can indeed be very problematic in later years if not learned well initially. Tone marking is phonemic in Mandarin and it was graded in both written work, since pinyin includes tone marking, and in students’ oral presentations. They wanted nearly constant supervision and reassurance about their pronunciation from the teacher instead.

3.1.2. Focus on form through grammar presentation, repetition, explanation, and practice

Jin had a systematic approach to grammar instruction and providing a focus on form, which she described as entailing either an explicit or implicit presentation of structures, meaningful input, opportunities to practice using communicative tasks, and then feedback or metalinguistic explanations in either Chinese or English. Her teaching with this proficiency level also involved significant repetition of new input. The role of repetition in FL teaching and learning – and even in the teaching of grammar – has been theorized differently over the last few decades from both psycholinguistic and sociocultural standpoints (Duff, 2000; Skehan, 1998). Repetition observed in Jin’s class was of her own utterances, her repetition and recasting of a student’s utterance, students’ self- and other-repetitions, and the rebroadcasting of a student’s response so others could hear it. Indeed, the students’ apparent need to repeat forms or have others or the teacher repeat the teacher’s modelled forms often and to have their versions of utterances repeated and corrected by the teacher was very salient. The form of repetition, whether choral or individual or with few or many repetitions, differed from
student to student, however. One student mentioned the powerful effects of group repetition: “it feels like a communist sort of ... choral drill session. I think [it’s] very useful... [Hearing] everybody doing it together ... jams it into your head.” Several other students felt just the opposite: that they needed to hear multiple individual instances of the same form, not only by the teacher but also by students. They said that it was helpful to hear a structure five or six times before being asked to produce it themselves. This not only gave them an opportunity to solidify their understanding of the form’s meaning and structure, but allowed them to contrast two solo models or “notice gaps” between the teacher’s and another student’s utterance (Schmidt and Frota, 1986; Skehan, 1998; Swain, 1995). Students remarked: “I think it would be nice if once in a while if time permits, if five or six people repeat something;” “a lot of times I don’t know what she’s saying in class, and by the time everyone’s said it through I know what they’re talking about;” “it kind of raises the bar ... they’re mirroring how you would say it and [if] you could hear their mistakes, you would hear your own mistakes.” Jin altered her oral practice routines in class to accommodate students’ apparently mixed needs in this regard. Repetition needed to be offset by intrinsically interesting content. As one student observed, “You have to balance it to make sure people are still motivated... she tries to find stories that can engage [us] ...”.

Jin was rather ambivalent about the amount of modeling and repetition she was providing, wondering if it was sometimes too much. She used repetition quite extensively in grammar instruction and the presentation of new vocabulary and Chinese characters, as well as when presenting the content of new reading texts. For example, she sometimes presented a new story in the text with pictures in her hand, introducing the people, and repeating key information about them several times, then sticking the pictures on the blackboard and writing the characters for key items on the board. She also modelled correct forms, providing explicit grammatical explanations, normally after having provided many instances of the form in context, or drawing attention to forms that students might otherwise have missed. Yet interestingly, despite her metalinguistic focus, modeling, and repetition, students in interviews said they needed to hear even more models. In summary, productive areas for future research in L2 teaching/learning include not only what forms teachers focus on, when, and how, the nature of the explanation and feedback, but also how students selectively attend to certain types of focus on form or repetition at different points in the presentation of new material, as well as across different proficiency levels and among students with different learning styles.

3.1.3. Corrective feedback

Issues connected with feedback and error correction – including forms, quantity, types, directness, implicit vs. explicit nature, immediacy, source, consistency, and preferences – continue to be major points of discussion and debate among language teaching researchers, students, and teachers (e.g., Chaudron, 1988; van Lier, 1988; Gass, 1997; Gass and Mackey, 1998; Lightbown, 2000; Long and Robinson, 1998,
Lyster, 1998). Long (1996) argues that “negative feedback obtained in negotiation work or elsewhere may be facilitative of second language development, at least for vocabulary, morphology and language-specific syntax, and essential for learning certain specifiable L1–L2 contrasts (p. 414, emphasis in original).

However, participants’ views about the manner, value and utility of error correction, and longitudinal studies of the effectiveness of correction are seldom found in classroom research. When their views are included, observations and analyses of classroom discourse are missing from the research design (e.g., in student surveys; Conrad, 1999; Tse, 2000). Yet these views provide useful information about students’ expectations, awareness, learning styles, and psycholinguistic processes and outcomes and make comparisons possible. Interview and questionnaire data in our study, as reported above, revealed that students were very concerned about their need to receive constant correction by the teacher to ensure flawless Mandarin production. Despite the misgivings of many students about its utility, some mentioned that they could correct one another and that was one of the advantages of peer work, a point mentioned by Pica (2000) and others in ESL settings. Students also appreciated feedback provided in an upbeat, constructive manner, whether in peer work or whole-class interaction (consistent with Lightbown’s, 1991, observation, which also showed the effectiveness of feedback delivered with that affective tone). Jin was reluctant to correct students’ errors at every turn, believing that students need to aim for accurate production but also need confidence, support, and practice (unconstrained output) in their language development. Students’ wishes were linked to their being in a competitive program stressing mastery learning across the four skills; but many students had also learned languages such as Spanish, French, and even elementary Mandarin in programs using communicative approaches to language teaching. Therefore, it was not simply the case that they had no prior experience with methods favoring freer communication and less error correction. They insisted that they were not learning Mandarin just to pass tests or get good grades; they were learning it to be able to communicate well with native speakers in the future. Thus, students themselves desired L2 accuracy, expected recasts, and wanted to become highly effective and proficient Mandarin speakers (see also Tse, 2000). As one student noted, “I think the teacher has to be vigilant about [correcting students]. I think she has to absolutely correct each time instead of having that tendency of being supportive and saying ‘Okay that was all right’.” This particular student had earlier praised Jin’s teaching and the upbeat classroom atmosphere – especially in comparison with a teacher at another institution who had been very rigid and intolerant of errors.

Another student likewise mentioned the need for correction but within a positive affective context (see Brown, 2000). In fact, many students in interviews mentioned that a positive, humorous, even playful learning environment, such as Jin’s class, was enjoyable and conducive to learning (Arnold, 1999; Broner and Tarone, 2001; Cook, 2000; Duff, 1996). One issue for Jin was the dilemma about correcting students who had particularly accented speech from having studied Mandarin previously with L2 teachers who were not very proficient or from their prior linguistic socialization in homes where a different variety of Chinese was
spoken. As a result, the class had a mixture of people who spoke Mandarin with standard, non-standard, and interlanguage tones. However, because tones are phonemic and therefore crucial in Mandarin, program staff felt that allowing students to produce erroneous, uncorrected tones was not in their best interests. Jin herself was conflicted about this issue, noting that she tried to provide strategic feedback but also to focus on meaning and function. Although at this level of Mandarin, students produce relatively few extended written compositions, some ESL research has demonstrated that learners benefit relatively little from grammatical corrections in written essays (e.g., Polio et al., 1998). What needs to be examined further is whether oral corrective feedback about phonetic or grammatical accuracy is fundamentally different and of greater potential benefit to students (as seems to be the case) than written feedback, because of its immediacy, frequency, and salience. In addition, students’ and teachers’ convictions and concerns about the need for and utility of certain kinds of error correction and the actual effectiveness of such feedback – both short-term and long-term – requires ongoing research. This is especially the case when students may withdraw from language programs or may evaluate instructional practices negatively based on their perceptions regarding error correction that may be academically unfounded.

4. Summary and conclusion

This article began with a discussion of competing perspectives from research, theory, and practice that teachers negotiate as they teach. Jin, like many teachers, experienced dilemmas and conflicting perspectives about her instructional practices – how much pair work to include, how much modeling and repetition of patterns to provide, how much corrective feedback to produce and in what form. Approaches that had worked well in her adult ESL writing classes, for example, seemed inappropriate in first-year Mandarin L2 classes; formats that worked well in other years seemed less effective, because of changes in class size, timetabling, curricular changes, the preferences and practices of teachers in other sections of multi-section courses, and then the composition of students in this course. Many such contingencies affect a teacher’s instructional practices and contribute to her ongoing professional development, her knowledge, decision-making, and success in teaching (van Lier, 1996), as this case study revealed. Cumulatively, such adjustments also influence local curriculum development and reform. Although past FL teaching methods and orthodoxies have offered their own prescriptions, often based on limited studies involving “less commonly taught languages,” we believe that “best practices” in teaching must be understood by considering the teaching context on a number of different levels, its goals, history, and resources, and so on.

In this study, we identified several themes that emerged from our observations, questionnaires, and interviews in one Mandarin L2 class. Findings revealed that, paradoxically, whereas the teacher was committed to providing opportunities for
peer interaction and practice, but not providing excessive error correction, repetition, or modeling, students on the other hand expressed strong views about the desirability of having less peer interaction rather than more, and more error correction, repetition, and modeling. Jin and her students were quite articulate about these points of significant theoretical contention in applied linguistics.

This study also demonstrated the utility of interpretive, qualitative research that attempts to ascertain the professional knowledge and socialization of teachers and their in-class experiences with students in a sociohistorical context. A triangulation of perspectives on instructional practices was central to this study. Although causal inferences between the observed or reported practices and acquisition cannot be made, the insights of the astute language learners and teacher in this class nevertheless provided important data about the needs of language learners. It is precisely this kind of experience-based introspection that has generated such important and now widely adopted principles as the role of “noticing gaps” between one’s own and another’s utterances in learning (Schmidt and Frota, 1986). Their acute need to hear more models of language in order to notice gaps between those models and their own production surfaced in many students’ comments. Research that uncovers participants’ perspectives of their sociocultural language learning experiences as well as their observed performance is valuable in applied linguistics not because the findings can be generalized to the larger population of learners – since they usually cannot – but because they shed light on central theoretical and pedagogical principles and tensions in the field by providing new data from new contexts (e.g., Bailey and Nunan, 1996; Lantolf, 2000; Schacter and Gass, 1996).

A concluding comment is that further classroom-based research on non-European target languages is sorely needed, since the cultures, contexts, and particularities of those languages offer important and possibly unique insights into larger theoretical issues that have been dominated to date by research on Western European languages. Language curricula and assessment approaches are often modeled after those developed for these languages, placing considerable pressure on teachers and students to cover a comparable amount of material within the same timeframe. This goal belies evidence that it takes different lengths of time (in total hours) to reach the same levels of oral proficiency in different FLs, with considerably more time needed for typologically unrelated FLs (Liskin-Gasparro, 1982). In addition, there needs to be greater attention paid to FL instruction and students’ experiences in first-year university courses specifically. At this level, language courses are often mandatory and students’ experiences in the first year often determine whether they will continue to study that language or any other; moreover, it is in this critical year when Mandarin tones and new orthographies are normally introduced. More research is needed on which of the three Chinese orthographies should be taught, and in which order – the romanized pinyin system, simplified characters, and more complicated, traditional Chinese characters (Bell, 1995, 1997; de Courcy, 1997, 2002; Everson, 1988, 1994); how to implement a more task-based teaching approach, if that is appropriate (Ohta, 2001); and the issue of L₁ vs. L₂ use (e.g., Turnbull and Arnett, 2002). It would serve international language education well to pursue these issues more vigorously in the years to come.
References


