Issues in Mandarin Language Instruction:

Theory, Research, and Practice

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1 We wish to thank our research participants for their involvement in the study, and also the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.
ABSTRACT

This article reports on an exploratory study of instructional issues encountered in the teaching of Mandarin as a foreign language (FL) 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 modelling, 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 modelling. 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. In addition, we recommend future research that examines classroom interaction by means of direct observation but also captures teachers’ and students’ perspectives on their language teaching and learning processes, and the evolving nature of their knowledge, beliefs, preferences, and abilities.
**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 & Richards, 1996; Freeman & 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 Figure 1).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Traditionally, research in FL classes has focused on the teaching and learning 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 & Williams, 1998; Hadley, 2001; Hall, 2001; Lightbown, 2000; Long & Robinson, 1988; 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 & Nunan, 1996; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Freeman & 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 & Frota, 1986; Schumann, 1997; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000).
In short, 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, 2000). 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.

The Study

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.

Research Methods

Standard qualitative research methods were employed (e.g., Denzin & 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. The class was audiotaped at least once each week, producing approximately 22 hours 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

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2 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.
or course, nor was it designed to provide a causal explanation about the effect of certain teaching practices on students’ learning outcomes.

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. In terms of her teaching philosophy and approach, Jin explained that her primary goal was to help students communicate in Mandarin, but that she didn’t espouse any one theory or method to achieve that:

I believe it is possible to use an integrated approach combining cognitive, communicative, and humanistic features of current theories and models which would include attention to rule formation, affect, comprehension, and communication, and which would view the learner as someone who thinks, feels, interacts, and constructs meaning during the learning process.

The course met three times per week for 1.5 hours each lesson. It was a very demanding 5-credit, 4-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 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 cover 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.

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 & Verplaetse, 2000; van Lier, 1996).

Fostering a Focus on Form, Linguistic Interaction, and a Positive Affective Climate

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 1st-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 perspectives 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 tension 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 pronunciation, tones, and sufficient amounts of vocabulary and grammar before being left to their own communicative devices were factors that weighed heavily in Jin’s decisions about how much time to allow for 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. Another factor was the classroom itself, which was small and crowded with oversized wooden chairs. Pair work that was observed usually was limited to 10 minutes 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 under these conditions:

> First, there is too much to cover in the first year so we have to rush over everything. Second, the curriculum stresses students' written performance. Written homework, dictation and tests (standardized across all the sections of the same level) count as much as 90%, and oral proficiency is left with only 10% for the final grade. Both teachers and students have to sacrifice more communicative activities/skills because of the written exams.

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 more need--and more confidence--to use the L2 in class and to discuss their L2-related extracurricular experiences in class discussions:

[The ESL learners felt] free, even enthusiastic, to engage in communicative activities in class because that is what they have to do outside the classroom everyday. But learning a foreign language such as Chinese in the States is very different. Our students usually only hear or speak the language for five hours of classroom time, during which we have to rush over everything from pronunciation to grammar, dividing the speaking time across sometimes more than 20 students. The chances for them to hear or use the language once they step out of the classroom are very rare so they do not feel secure or natural when they are asked to perform simulated conversations in the classroom, especially the beginners.

Nevertheless, these demands and, above all, the intellect of the students in Jin’s courses made teaching Mandarin both challenging and rewarding for her. She was also influenced by the results of a study conducted in all the first year classes the previous year (Li, 1999). Questionnaires and interviews in that study revealed that students did not appreciate pair and group practice or class presentations to the same extent as the teachers did--although they acknowledged 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 instruction and error correction, and practising characters. Reviewing the results of that earlier study, Jin commented:

I was really surprised by the results of the survey. I used to get students to converse in pairs every class. I also asked the students to give an oral presentation (in pairs or small groups) at the end of each lesson, in order to engage them in activities promoting interaction and meaning negotiation, and to help them work with language at the discourse level. I felt very gratified to hear students speaking in Chinese. I thought they also enjoyed the activities from their hilarious laughter and other responses. The low rating of this activity really puzzled and discouraged me… So now I am trying to be more realistic and moderate. I still ask the students to work in pairs, but not every class. And if I do, I try to make the task as clear and reasonable as possible so students will feel more confident in performing it. I also reduced oral presentations to once every two lessons.
Jin’s current teaching practices were thus influenced by the research findings from previous classes, including her own, regarding students’ preferences, much the same way as the teachers in Duff and Uchida’s (1997) study modified their behaviors and practices to accommodate the wishes of their students in an EFL setting in Japan, even when the students’ wishes conflicted with those of the teachers. As in most university settings, students’ evaluations are a very important factor in instructors’ reappointment, tenure, or promotion. Thus, it is important that teachers be as responsive to students’ learning needs and instructional preferences as possible.

Jin’s students were wary of peer work and they were 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. As one graduate student in the course remarked:

I think it’s virtually useless to hear other students repeat. In fact, I think it can be quite harmful, particularly in Asian languages where the pronunciation is so different from our sort of cultural norms and language norms. I feel the most damaging tool that’s used in class is the paired conversations without supervision…. it’s a problem.

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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. At this stage in the students’ Mandarin L2
development, they were preoccupied with the likely negative effects of being exposed to
inaccurate tones. Tone marking is phonemic in Mandarin and it was graded in both written work,
since pinyin includes tone marking, and in students’ oral presentations. To both the researchers’
and teacher’s surprise, students were almost unanimous in their misgivings about pair work in
that respect. They wanted nearly constant supervision and reassurance about their pronunciation
from the teacher instead.

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:

I try to use pictures, realia, and stories to introduce new structures and vocabulary in a
meaningful context where their attention is not immediately drawn to its formal
properties. Systematic presentation of rules, if needed, is given by meaningful input,
which is reinforced by different tasks and activities. Even pattern drills, if used
appropriately, can be an effective means to facilitate language practice. Finally, each
treatment of a grammatical structure concludes with students being given the opportunity
to use the structure in communicative tasks.

Grammar was presented explicitly in the textbook, implicitly in dialogs and other texts
which contained numerous instances of a grammatical structure, and then sometimes explicitly
in Jin’s metalinguistic explanations about certain points, usually given in English. In Excerpt 1,
for example, the grammar structure in focus was noun-modifying phrases, which in English
follow head nouns, as in “the girl [studying French]” but in Mandarin appear before the head
noun, as in [studying French] + de + girl. To teach this point, Jin showed the class the
picture of a middle-aged man and described his habits and preferences, such as smoking, eating, and drinking. Then the features of six women were briefly described by the teacher and shown in the pictures that were put on the board (e.g., with the Mandarin phrases, *hui zuo fan de xiaojie*, ‘the lady who can cook;’ *mai maoyi de* ‘who sells sweaters;’ *xihuan he jiu de* ‘who likes drinking (alcohol)’; *ai he kafei de* ‘who likes to drink coffee;’ *xue fawen de* ‘who studies French’; *ai chou yan de* ‘who likes to smoke’). The class was then asked to vote on which two women would be suitable dates for the bachelor. The interaction involved considerable repetition of the target grammatical structure, ensuring that students produced the nominalizing particle *de* between the modifying phrase and the head noun, which is shown below in bold.

Then there was some humorous banter about the age of the some of the women, who appeared to be much younger than the man.

**Excerpt 1 (11/11/99)**:

1. Teacher: (after presentation in Chinese about the bachelor and candidates) Wo wen ni (writes) [I ask you]… You have to vote okay, Wang Xiansheng shi zheige yanzi [Mr. Wang is this kind of person]. Okay this is Wang Xiansheng. Neiwei xiaojie hao? [Which young woman is good?] (writes on board) You can vote (for) two okay?

2. SSS: (laugh)
3. Teacher: (laugh)
4. Paul: What’s the first one again?
5. Teacher: Hm?
6. Paul: What’s the first one again?
7. Student: (someone answers his question)
8. Teacher: *Xihuan he kafei de xiaojie. Xihuan he kafei de neiwei xiaojie*. Paul ni shuo neiwei xiaojie hao? [The young woman who likes to drink coffee. That young woman who likes to drink coffee. Paul which woman do you think is good?]
9. Paul: *Hui zuo fan de neiwei xiaojie* hao [The young woman who can cook is good]
10. Teacher: Ah, ta shuo *hui zuo fan de neiwei xiaojie* hao. [Ah, he says the young woman who can cook is good.]
11. Rick: Wo you yige wenti. Ni zhidao bu zhidao tamen duo da. [I have a question. Do you know how old they are?]
12. Teacher: Ah tamen::. [Ah they::.]
13. SS: Ah! [((laugh))]

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3 Transcription conventions follow: italics are used for Mandarin forms; English translations are provided in italics between square brackets; tone marks are not shown; comments about interactions appear in doubled parentheses; underlining shows a speaker’s emphasis; colons indicate added lengthening of a syllable; boldface font is used to flag items of interest, including the use of English in some examples; (x) refers to an unclearly heard word.
14. Teacher: [(laugh)] Ni shuo tamen duo da? [How old would you say they are?]
15. Rick: Ah (laugh) wo shuo … xihuan chou yan de neiwei xiaojie mmm sanshi sui? [I say … the young woman who likes to smoke is mm thirty?]
17. Rick: Keshi mm xue fawen de xiaojie tai xiao. [But the woman who studies French is too young] But the
18. SSS: ((loud laughter))
19. SS/T: Xiaojie tai xiao! ((laugh)) [The woman is too young!]
20. Teacher: (xx) neige xiaojie tai xiao! ((laugh)) Keshi, you de xiansheng hen xihuan … hen xiao de xiaojie [(xx) that young woman is too young! But there are gentlemen who really like very young women]
21. SSS: ((laugh))
22. Student: (xxx) ((apparently asking man’s age))
23. Teacher: Ta wushi sui. [He’s fifty years old]
24. Student: (Ta mei you da!?) [He’s not old]

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). For example, Skehan (1998) wrote:

repetition in what we hear means that the discourse we have to process is less dense; repetition in the language we produce provides more time to engage in micro and macro conversational planning. In acquisitional terms, repetition in conversation can serve to consolidate what is being learned, since the conversation may act as an unobtrusive but effective scaffold for what is causing learning difficulty. (p. 33)

Using Excerpt 1 as a typical example, repetition took different structural or interactional forms in this Mandarin classroom:

- repetition by the teacher of her own utterances (e.g., Turn 8);
- the teacher’s repetition of students’ utterances (e.g., Turns 15-16, 17-19);
- students’ self-repetition when they were not heard the first time (e.g. Turns 4 and 6, with a question in English);
- the teacher’s repetition of a student’s question, to rebroadcast it to the class (Turns 11-13);
• the teachers’ repetition of a student’s response and then request for elaboration on the response (which appeared later in the lesson);

• the teacher’s partial repetition of the first part of a student’s utterance (also later in the lesson), with the addition of the nominalizing particle *de* which the student had missed.

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 in the Mandarin classroom. The form of repetition, whether choral or individual or with few or many repetitions, differed from student to student, however. One student mentioned how powerful and effective it was to repeat structures as a group:

In terms of repetition, I think what is very useful is this sort of- it feels like a communist sort of…choral drill session. I think they’re very useful… There’s something about hearing the whole group say something versus doing this on your own, like hearing the tape and repeating it, but everybody doing it together that jams it into your head. I don’t know what it is but it’s qualitatively different than doing it at home. And I find that I remember the tones… I know the tones because I remember, okay the whole group did this boom boom boom. And that’s very helpful. But when we switch from that to ‘now you say it, now you say it, now you say it,’ I hear this sort of bastardization of the pronunciation, then, sometimes that can be harmful.

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, the teacher’s and another student’s. In other words, it offered an opportunity to “notice gaps” between the two models (Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Skehan, 1998; Swain, 1995). Three students’ comments follow:

Instead of everyone repeating constantly what the lesson is, or what [the teacher] says or what the book says, I really think it helps if she does call on people individually. And I know a lot of the undergrads may not like that (laughs), but I personally feel that that helps because even if you say something wrong—chances are, everybody is going to say something wrong at some point—I think with Chinese you really need to have an individual focus once in a while… I think it would be nice if once in a while if time permits, if five or six people repeat something
‘Cause like 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.

When you see someone else or hear someone else talking crisply, fluently, it kind of raises the bar for yourself to pick it up yourself, to try to improve yourself daily… In some instances they’re mirroring how you would say it and you could hear their mistakes and in that you would hear your own mistakes.

On the basis of these viewpoints, Jin tried altering her way of leading oral practice in class to accommodate students’ various preferences. Some students noted that since repetition of forms can become tedious and mindless (see also Duff, 2000), they must be keenly aware of differences between variants of the same utterance—that is, noticing gaps between the teacher’s and their own output; or between different students’ production—as long as they are told which version is correct. They stated that a lack of prediction about who would be called upon was also important to keep them engaged and attentive. One way of doing this was to call on students in a somewhat random fashion; another was to incorporate repetition in interesting activities that are intrinsically motivating, as in the match-making discussion in Excerpt 1:

I think the best thing she does is when she calls on people because it puts you on the spot. I’m sure a lot of people don’t go home and listen to the tapes and it’s hard to motivate yourself where you just listen to the tape for 2 hours where you just repeat something… But there’s something about being forced to say them out loud [in class].

To me [repetition] is really important. It can be boring too. You have to balance it to make sure people are still motivated, you can’t make it really boring, but it is really very essential to hear it over and over and over so that it comes as a natural thing… and to listen to the tape and repeat it. … [To offset the potential boredom of repetition] she tries to find like the story we did today about this man who’s trying to find a girlfriend, she tries to find stories that she can engage and she was repeating over and over like “this woman da-da-da,” and “this woman da-da-da…” It was the same structure but it really helped in a way.

Jin herself was ambivalent about the amount of modeling and repetition she was providing. After one of her lessons dealing with describing people’s origins, she mused:

I don’t know if [my modeling] is sufficient or not. I put all the new words and structures into the picture description. I felt it was a lot of repetitions already. Because I was talking about a lot of people, different nationalities, different places. But I don’t know… if I did
enough. I usually don’t like to drill much so I was talking and saying listen to me and I was talking and asking the questions.

Interestingly, students overall said they needed to hear even more models. Excerpt 2 reveals a typical interactional pattern for reviewing new characters and explaining their origins. Often Jin told stories about the historical and semantic origins of written characters and she encouraged students to create their own mnemonic devices to help them memorize the characters. The purpose of this phase of the lesson was to ensure that students could reproduce the proper tones for the characters and could understand how to write and recognize the many new traditional Chinese characters covered each lesson. The use of English for this purpose is shown in bold.

**Excerpt 2 (9/30/99)**

1. T: ((T points to character on board))
2. SSS: Taitai [Wife]
3. T: ((nonverbally elicits repetition))
4. SSS: Taitai
5. T: Zai shuo yici [Say it again]
6. SSS: Taitai
8. SSS: Taitai
9. T: Taitai zenme xie? [How do you write taitai] ((writes Chinese character on board)) This is da right? Da with one dot here. Tai. ((note: tai “大” is written with the character for da “大” ‘big’ with an additional dot/stroke))

((several turns later))

10. T: Neige Zenme nian? [How do you read that one]
11. SSS: Mingzi [Name]
12. T: Zai shuo yici [Say it again]
13. SSS: Mingzi
14. T: Mingzi
15. SSS: Mingzi
16. T: Mingzi is something you call people. That’s why there’s a mouth here. Okay that’s ming. Zi ne? [As for zi?] It’s very important. Zi means character. So when we learn how to write, we write the character or zi. Then mingzi, our name is composed of characters, so the characters become people’s names. (名字)

Thus the words taitai ‘wife’ and mingzi ‘name’ and then several other characters were repeated many times each by the students and teacher (taitai is uttered 8 times and mingzi 5 times) until
Jin was satisfied that they had reproduced the correct tones and understood how to write the characters using the correct stroke order.

Repetition was therefore used quite extensively in grammar instruction (Excerpt 1) and vocabulary/character presentation (Excerpt 2). It was also used when presenting the content of new reading texts (see Excerpt 3). Here, Jin is not reading the text, which appears in traditional characters in the students’ textbook (T’ung, 1982), but is presenting the content as a story with pictures in her hand. At first Jin presents it very slowly, referring to the pictures as she introduces the husband and wife. She then sticks the pictures on the blackboard and writes the characters for key items on the board and uses a more normal pace. Repetition runs throughout her presentation of the text, as is apparent in Excerpt 3, and afterward they discuss the content of the text.

**Excerpt 3 (9/30/99)**

1. T: Xianzai qing dajia ting wo shuo. Ting wo shuo. Zhe. ((holding up picture)) [Now everyone listen to what I say. Listen to me. This ((indicating picture)).]
2. SS: Zhe. [This]
3. T: Ting wo shuo. [Listen to what I say]
4. S: Oh

[This.((slowly)) This is Zhang Hua. His surname is Zhang. His (first) name is Hua. His name is Zhang Hua ((writes)). We all call him Little Zhang. Understand? We all call him Little Zhang. ((writes)) We all call him Little Zhang. Little Zhang is Chinese. Little Zhang is Chinese. ((writes)) He is from Beijing. He is from Beijing. Let’s listen to it again. ((faster)) [This is Zhang Hua. His surname is Zhang. His (first) name is Hua. His name is Zhang Hua. We all call him Little Zhang. Little Zhang is Chinese. He is from Beijing. ((writes)) He is from Beijing. This is his wife. Her surname is Wang. Her name is Wang YingYing. ((writes)) Her name is Wang YingYing… Her name is Wang YingYing. We all call her?]

6. SSS: Xiao Wang [Little Wang]
In addition to the repeated modelling of correct FL forms, Jin provided explicit grammatical explanations, normally after having provided many instances of the form in context. Jin also commonly gave grammatical explanations or drew attention to forms that students might otherwise not have attended to. In connection with Excerpt 1, for example, Jin described when *de* was necessary (focal forms appear in boldface below):

_Mai maoyi de nei wei xiaojie. OK. Suoyi we are talking about this. ((writes)) He jiu de nei wei xiaojie.[The young woman who sells sweaters. OK. So… The young woman drinking wine.] You can also use a modal verb. _Ai he jiu de nei wei xiaojie. Xihuan he kafei de nei wei xiaojie.[The woman who loves to drink wine. The woman who likes to drink coffee.] We learned _de _structure before. Right? _Wo de, ta de, hen da de. Hen gui de, hen gui de maoyi, hen da de jia, wode pengyou, wode zidian, wode shu. Haiyou shenme? [Mine, his/hers, a big one. An expensive one, an expensive sweater, a big house, my friend, my dictionary, my book. What else?] They are nouns, stative verbs, OK. Now we come to clauses. All Chinese modifications … Modifier before the modified. ((writes))…

In another example, Jin provided grammatical and pragmatic explanations and examples of the form, meaning and use of modal verbs: e.g., _yao_ ‘want’ and _xiang_ ‘would like’ and _xiang yao_ “want, desire.” This feedback was linked to problems that she had observed on students’ assignments.

Following the explanation they would play a game connected to modals.

So _yao_ means want. Want. _Yao_ can be followed by a noun as is in I want a cup of coffee. _Wo yao yi bei kafei. Um. Yaoshi ni qu mai dongxi. If you go shopping. There are sales person who usually say _qing wen ni yao shenme_? They don’t say how can I help you? Can I help you? Um _tamen shuo ni yao shenme? Ni shuo um wo yao yi bei kafei. Wo xiang yao:: yi wan mian. Wo xiang yao shenme dongxi._ Ok? [They would say ‘What do you want?,’ you say ‘I want a cup of coffee’, I say ‘I want a bowl of noodles. I want such and such, okay? But xiang is softer than yao. So usually when I want a cup of coffee the English speaker says ‘I would like to have a cup of coffee.’ So in Chinese we say _wo xiang yao shenme shenme_. Jintian wanshang wo xiang he yi bei jiu. Jintian wanshang wo xiang chi Yingguo fan. [So in Chinese we say ‘we would like to do such and such. Tonight I would like to drink a glass of wine, tonight I would like to have a British meal.’]

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, and also how students selectively attend to certain types of focus on form (or repetition) at different points in the presentation of new oral and written material, as well as across different proficiency
levels and among students with different learning styles. Also, comparisons between students’ and teachers’ perspectives of how much repetition and modeling is available and necessary would be useful.

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 & Mackey, 1998; Lightbown, 2000; Long & Robinson, 1998, Lyster, 1998). For example:

this is not simply a matter of learners committing errors and teachers correcting them in various ways. It is rather … a matter of continuous adjustment between speakers and hearers obliged to operate in a code that gives them problems. This adjustment-in-interaction may be crucial to language development, for it leads to noticing discrepancies between what is said and what is heard, and to a resolution of these discrepancies (van Lier, 1988, p. 180).

*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 (Long, 1996, 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 with the views of teachers and the academic community at large. Interview and questionnaire data in our study revealed that students were very concerned about their need to receive constant correction by the teacher to ensure flawless Mandarin production. Some of these comments were included in Table 1 related to the perceived disadvantages of peer work (e.g., comments by students S2, S6, S9) in
terms of their need for correction by the teacher. Other comments revealed the students’ concerns about learning incorrect forms from classmates (e.g., S3, S4, S5, S7, S8, S12, S14). Some students mentioned, however, that they could also correct one another and that was one of the advantages of peer work (S7, S12, and interview comments), a point mentioned by Pica (2000) and others in ESL settings. In addition, students 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 and support in their language development, and must be given credit for what is done well and not just penalized for their errors. 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 more free communication and less error correction. Students 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. Some of them subsequently traveled to China for summer coursework in Chinese and cultural experiences or obtained employment in prestigious institutions (e.g., United Nations), at least in part because of their FL proficiency. Thus, students themselves desired L2 accuracy, expected recasts; and wanted to become highly effective and proficient Mandarin speakers (see also Tse’s, 2000).

However, in our study, interview comments revealed differences between students’ expectations regarding feedback on their written and oral work. They expressed dismay at how their written work was graded, and particularly their work corrected by overly zealous teaching assistants.
With the writing they’re pretty strict. Those characters have to be exactly right. At first I was like, what’s up with this? You know like, you’ve never written the characters before and it takes a couple of hours to do and they slap a grade on it the first time you practice it but on the other hand it makes you look at it very carefully. …

Yet they expected explicit feedback on oral production in class, as in the following example from Excerpt 1 (Turns 38-40), which also shows Kim’s immediate uptake of the corrected form.

Kim: He jiu zhei wei xiaojie. [The young woman who is drinking wine]
Teacher: He jiu de. He jiu de. [The one drinking wine. Drinking wine.]
Kim: Ahhh. He jiu de neiwei xiaojie. [Ahh that young woman drinking wine]

Several students’ comments convey this strong preference:

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’. Really reserving the good comment for the really really good pronunciation.

Within this program there’s been very little error correction except in the [tutorial] section. I’d like to see a little more error correction but not like correcting you mid-sentence unless you’re really struggling with a word.

Even if I can’t say [things] right, to hear her say it correctly, to hear it right after I do it helps... I don’t think its intimidating [to be corrected so much] but I guess part of the thing is that she has her agenda. Like she can’t spend half the class correcting us…

Interestingly, the student who mentioned the need for the teacher to be “vigilant” had mentioned earlier in the study that Jin was the best language instructor he’d ever had and that he particularly appreciated the positive classroom atmosphere and the teacher’s encouraging remarks. He resented the approach of a Mandarin teacher at another institution where he had once studied who had been intimidating, authoritarian, and very intolerant of learners’ errors.

I think [error correction] is very important. That helps you understand. One, you don’t want to make the same mistake again, especially in front of your own colleagues and peers but also you know especially if you’re speaking to a native Mandarin speaker you don’t want them to have to correct you, or maybe they won’t correct you, but you want to communicate as properly as you can to them… I think when you have something that’s different and unique and hard such as Mandarin, when you have a comfortable environment that you know that, okay if I make a mistake or do something wrong, I can get corrected and I’ll learn from that, then you want it to be fun and enjoyable.
Another student likewise mentioned the need for correction but within a positive affective context (Brown, 2000). In fact, many students in interviews mentioned that a positive, humorous, even playful learning environment, such as Jin’s class, was both important and enjoyable (Arnold, 1999; Broner & Tarone, 2001; Cook, 2000; Duff, 1996).

One student observed that some class members, including her, were singled out for correction when others might have the same problems but might not be corrected:

I feel that a couple people get picked on for their pronunciation but other people don’t have any tones but she never says anything about it. … Maybe I just don’t know the language well enough and maybe they are saying their tones right. I appreciate it but … the Asian kids they seem to say something but she may pick on something they pronounce wrong as far as the sounds but she doesn’t focus on the tones with them…

Jin discussed her dilemma about correcting students like this one 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, nonstandard, 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:

I am usually quite tolerant of learners’ errors, partly because of my training in applied linguistics, viewing learners' errors as a natural outcome of the development of communication skills. Of course I would like to hear my students speak perfect Mandarin Chinese, but … many native Chinese speakers do not [even] speak standard Mandarin. So my focus is usually on the meaning and function. I really try to be strategic in giving [corrective] feedback when it is necessary and beneficial.

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, Fleck & Leder, 1999). 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.

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 objective causal inferences between the observed or reported practices and acquisition cannot be made, other than reporting on students’ immediate uptake of forms, the insights of the very astute language learners and teacher in this class nevertheless provided important data about the needs of language learners and important feedback to the teacher as well about her practices. 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 & 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 & Nunan, 1996; Lantolf, 2000; Schacter & 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; see 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 & Arnett, 2002). It would serve international language education well to pursue these issues more vigorously in the years to come.

References


Figure 1: Interlinking Knowledge and Belief Systems Affecting Instructional Practices.\(^4\)

\(^4\) Woods (1996) distinguishes between knowledge structures and belief systems and, furthermore, adds the category of assumptions to his “ethno-cognitive model” of teachers’ decision-making processes.
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<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Working with someone allows you to use and communicate in Mandarin. A classmate adds different ideas and vocab.</td>
<td>I don’t feel I gain much from classmates. Perhaps they motivate me to perform competitively. We’re usually unsure of tones and self-conscious</td>
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<td>S2</td>
<td>We have to really concentrate on what the other is saying and respond correctly. I think it makes for a more relaxing environment when we do so. Whereas when we have to answer directly to the professor it is a little more stressful</td>
<td>If we are BOTH incorrect, we need to be corrected! That’s when the prof is essential!!</td>
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<td>S3</td>
<td>Learning what they have learned, noting differences in structure and pronunciation (helps you focus on correctly pronouncing words)</td>
<td>The disadvantages are quite serious and they are the “race to the bottom”—the idea that interaction at a low skill level drives pronunciation DOWN.</td>
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<td>S4</td>
<td>Can speak with other students (it’s less formal) and build your confidence level of Chinese speaking ability</td>
<td>Sometimes it is hard to focus. It is often hard to tell what is correct and incorrect for each other because we are not so knowledgeable yet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>It makes it more fun; it’s reassuring to know it’s difficult for all of us.</td>
<td>We get fewer chances to speak and we often hear incorrect tones as a result.</td>
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<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>More interesting than doing alone. Practice speaking.</td>
<td>Can’t correct speaking mistakes</td>
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<tr>
<td>S7</td>
<td>Correcting each other’s mistakes</td>
<td>Confusing the tones</td>
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<td>S8</td>
<td>Group presentation</td>
<td>Without practice, may learn bad pronunciation from peers</td>
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<td>S9</td>
<td>Application, practice</td>
<td>We sometimes make the same mistakes (i.e. pronunciation), which an instructor would catch</td>
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<td>S10</td>
<td>Pushing each other; you become more fluent and are more relaxed than when the teacher is asking you; it can be fun</td>
<td>You can be influenced by their mistakes; it can be frustrating if your levels are different</td>
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<tr>
<td>S11</td>
<td>Practice speaking which is very important</td>
<td>--</td>
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<tr>
<td>S12</td>
<td>Practicing anything with a partner is always advantageous. Your partner can explain certain concepts that you don’t understand to you and vice versa. Also, in explaining something to another person, you solidify your own understanding.</td>
<td>You may acquire errors and group work requires more time.</td>
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<td>S13</td>
<td>It helps build your vocabulary and allows you to practice the language</td>
<td>Both are probably beginners and might misunderstand or misinterpret pronunciations or usage of Mandarin.</td>
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<td>S14</td>
<td>It encourages creativity instead of regurgitation</td>
<td>Sometimes they suck</td>
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<tr>
<td>S15</td>
<td>Dialogues, peer help, peer study groups, someone to speak with that’s at the same level</td>
<td>Not always as disciplined, work is split up, not as intensive (sometimes)</td>
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