Perspectives on Chinese as a Foreign Language Education

Introduction

Editors

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Chinese as a language has a recorded history of five thousand years and the number of
native learners of Chinese greatly exceeds those of any other language in the world. However, it
has not been a popular choice of first foreign language of study for learners outside of China.

Historical records indicate that the learning of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) begun in 2,500 years ago in Qin and Han Dynasties when foreigners from then China’s
neighboring countries started to learn Chinese in order to live in China and engage themselves in
political, commercial, and/or religious activities (Dong, 2002). However, it is generally agreed
upon that the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) as a field of study begun in the
1950’s at Tsinghua University serving students from Eastern Europe in China (Zhang, D., 2000). The Cultural Revolution caused serious disruption, but the teaching and learning of Chinese for
foreigners resumed again in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s when China adopted the Open Door
Policy and decided to reintegrate itself into the world community (Qiu, 2010; Zhang, D., 2000).

In the United States, early learners of Chinese were mostly Christian missionaries. They
were also instrumental in the teaching of Chinese as foreign language in their effort to train
American missionaries so that they could better spread Christianity in China. The first Chinese
program in the United States was established at Yale University in 1876 by Samuel Wells
Williams (Hou, 1995). In 1879, Harvard University also set up its Chinese program to teach

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Chinese as a foreign language (Harvard, n.d., http://ealc.fas.harvard.edu/chinese). Yet the number of students they served was small.

CFL education witnessed its most rapid growth after the turn of the 21st century. With China becoming an increasingly important world economic and political powerhouse during the last decade, Chinese as a foreign language education has gradually attracted more attention from governments, business sectors, and education communities in many countries around the world in recent years. An increasing number of universities, colleges, and K-12 schools in the U.S. have also begun to offer Chinese programs for their students within the last decade.

The growing popularity of Chinese as a foreign language education is a new educational phenomenon. It is not surprising that we have limited understanding of CFL/CSL education in general since it is an emerging field within which “the research tradition is still developing” (Ke, 2012, p. 44). Most published literature in the field is related to research and discussions on technical, linguistic aspects of L2 Chinese teaching and learning as well as individual teaching techniques and strategies. There is a lack of a coherent body of CFL research and theories to guide the teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language. Books that offer focused discussions of CFL education from multiple perspectives are also rare. There is a literature gap that needs to be filled.

Since it is impossible to adequately capture the development of CFL/CSL around the world in one book due to the complexity surrounding the general development as well as teaching and learning of any L2, we chose for this book to focus on CFL/CSL education in China and the United States. In addition, it is important to note that in many chapters, there is no strict differentiation between the terms CFL and CSL. Most CFL educators and scholars do not make distinctions between the two terms, and they also use the terms interchangeably (Ke, 2012).

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Similarly, the term used referring to the teaching of Chinese to non-native language learners in China is *对外汉语教学*, which has been translated into *the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL)* or *the teaching of Chinese as a second language (TCSL)* (Qiu, 2010), and both terms are equally acceptable to CFL scholars and practitioners.

The collection of papers in this book seeks to provide in-depth, cross disciplinary discussion and analysis of various critical topics and issues in CFL/CSL education from historical, philosophical, sociocultural, theoretical, and research perspectives. The book traces the evolvement of CFL/CSL education from its initial occurrence in China in Han and Tang Dynasties to the latest development in China and the United States. Special attention is paid to CFL/CSL education after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and also after the turn of the 21st century when dramatic changes in CFL/CSL education were witnessed along with the social, political, and economic influences taking place in the country during its various contemporary historical periods.

Although the authors come from different academic disciplines and carry with them different theoretical and epistemological perspectives, a common understanding that runs through the various chapters is the view that CFL/CSL education development is closely connected to the various factors including social, cultural, political, and economic factors and that these factors constantly interact to shape and change the status and direction of CFL/CSL education in China and the United States. Interestingly, religion is also found to be a unique, strong driving force behind the spread of the Chinese language among non-Chinese speakers (Zhang, 2008). The teaching and learning of CFL/CSL enables different cultures to connect, contest against, and integrate with each other. This process also transforms the Chinese language itself into the modern day Chinese that is used and taught to the native Chinese and non-Chinese

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learners. It is our hope that the book provides valuable insights for CFL/CSL researchers, practitioners, language educators, and policies makers in China, the United States, and across the world and those who are interested in gaining a better understanding of the various issues related to CFL/CSL education and language education in general.

Content Highlights

The book contains thirteen chapters. Except Chapter 1 which presents a historical overview of the field in the contexts of China and the United States, each chapter examines a critical aspect of CFL/CSL education supported by a review of critical research related to the topic.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the historical development of CSL in China and CFL in the United States. It also provides a brief account of how CFL expanded across the world. It addresses CSL/CFL development in four periods: a) Imperial China, b) 1949 to 1980, c) 1980 to 2000, and d) 2001 to the present. The chapter concludes with a discussion of critical issues that challenges future development of CSL and CFL education in the two countries.

Chapter 2 presents a focused discussion of the Chinese government’s policies and initiatives for promoting CFL around the world. These initiatives together reflect a profound shift of focus in China’s language promotion policy, that is, from “inviting in” (focusing on educating international students in China) to “walking out” (focusing on assisting learners outside China to study Chinese). The chapter is divided into four sections: a) the historical development of the Chinese government’s policies and practices in relation to the dissemination and promotion of the Chinese language, b) China’s language internationalization policies and initiatives since 2004, c) the implications of China’s language internationalization policies and
initiatives for CFL education, and d) a summary of key points and a discussion of future research directions.

Chapter 3 surveys and examines current and recent U.S. government initiatives aimed at expanding Chinese language study. These range from the “Critical Language” designation applied during the George W. Bush administration to President Barack Obama's announcement of the “100,000 Strong” initiative in 2009, a U.S. national effort designed to increase dramatically the number and to diversify the composition of American students studying in China. In addition, major Chinese language and culture initiatives and programs supported by private organizations are reviewed. The chapter also offers various conceptual frameworks for understanding the challenges and barriers these initiatives face.

Chapter 4 provides a critical review of major second language learning (SLL) theories that inform current CFL research, including the generative approach, cognitive approaches, functional perspectives, interaction theory, socio-cultural theory, sociolinguistic perspectives, the dynamic and complex system approach, as well as influential learning theories developed specifically for the Chinese language. It also presents a synthesis of key issues and topics addressed in current CFL research, including the nature of language, the SLL process, second language learners, and second language development. The chapter concludes with a discussion of areas demanding more attention and alternative perspectives that will contribute to understanding the complexities of SLL and will generate theory-guided practices to promote CFL learning.

Chapter 5 provides a critical review of language policy in CFL education since the 1950s in China. It begins with a literature review on medium of instruction by analyzing the national language policy, official syllabi, teacher training materials, and journal articles in China.

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Different perspectives are identified in regards to medium of instruction in the CFL teaching context. Two major camps of thought are analyzed to demonstrate the extreme attitudes towards the dilemma of “to use or not to use” students’ first language. The chapter ends with a call for re-examination of the overarching language policy and offers recommendations for future language policy development, teaching practice, and teacher education.

Chapter 6 offers a thorough examination of instructional materials for CFL. More specifically, it focuses on the content and approach of instructional materials and how they help learners develop their communication skills. In particular, it examines existing instructional materials designed for high school and college-level programs, not only in terms of the discrete skills and knowledge about the language they introduce, but also in terms of the spoken and written tasks they guide students to perform. The chapter identifies the strengths and also the gaps in present instructional materials and makes recommendations for ways to revise or augment materials to best address the needs of today’s CFL learners.

Chapter 7 focuses on technology and CFL Education. It reviews the emergence, development, and trends in applying technology to the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language to students with an English language background. The author presents and evaluates the advantages, drawbacks, inspirations, and challenges technology has brought to both teachers and learners of the Chinese language and explores a number of theoretical and critical issues to help readers better understand the complicated relationship between the task of learning Chinese and the promises of technology. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the permeation of technology in everyday life and how technology may shape the outlook of CFL education in years to come.

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Chapter 8 offers a focused discussion of CFL for K-12 students. The authors first explore the guiding principles, standards, CFL curriculum, best practices, standards (e.g., Common Core Standards, ACTFL standards, and state standards), and assessments for K-12 Chinese language learners. They also review major models of K-12 CFL programs, including world language programs, immersion programs, STARTALK summer programs, and programs that make extensive use of new technologies. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ways to further promote CFL education in K-12 settings.

Chapter 9 examines CFL at post-secondary levels. This chapter begins with a review of the historical development of CFL education at post-secondary levels in the U.S. since its inception. It includes two major sections. The first section focuses on curricular issues and the second on instruction. This is followed by a critical examination and rethinking of some of the common instructional approaches and prevalent instructional practices. Finally, the authors recommend some pedagogical innovations and resources, with particular attention to the use of new technological tools.

Chapter 10 addresses CFL for heritage students at the post-secondary level. It provides an overview of the history, theories, research, and practical issues in the area of teaching Chinese as a heritage language (TCHL), specifically as pertaining to the post-secondary setting in the United States. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research directions and advocates for research efforts in areas where practice needs explicit theoretical guidance.

Chapter 11 provides an overview of the field of Chinese language learning in study abroad contexts. It consists of three sections. The first section reviews theories and empirical studies that investigate the learning process and outcomes in Chinese study abroad contexts. Assessment instruments that have been widely adopted are also examined. Section Two

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discusses salient issues in curriculum design and pedagogy faced by various types of study abroad programs. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research and teaching practices that take into consideration both logistic issues and students’ learning needs in study abroad contexts in China.

Chapter 12 addresses Chinese teachers’ pedagogical adjustment and classroom management issues in cross-cultural contexts. This chapter reviews current research on the challenges Chinese teachers face in cross-cultural language teaching, their classroom management experiences, as well as their pedagogical adjustments in the U.S. The authors also offer implications for teacher training and professional development in Chinese as a foreign language education for schools and recruitment agencies in the U.S. and provide suggestions for future research directions.

Chapter 13 provides a critical examination of CFL teacher preparation and training. It discusses the challenges facing Chinese teacher education as Chinese expands from its traditional place as a post-secondary subject of study to the largely uncharted waters of traditional, immersion, and bilingual environments in K-12 settings. The chapter also discusses the current context of American education where Chinese language learning is situated, a context where demands for educational reform have resulted in efforts to reach consensus on what U.S. children need to learn to ensure their success as 21st century citizens. The chapter also highlights how these reforms have been fashioned into frameworks developed to guide both language instruction and language teacher development. Major models for the preparation and training of CFL teachers are reviewed. The chapter ends with a discussion of the most vexing challenges that must be overcome if Chinese language education is to become sustainable and successful.

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**Future Directions**

Building upon earlier research synthesis conducted by eminent researchers and scholars (e.g., Everson, 1993; Ke & Everson, 1999; Ke & Li, 2011; Ke & Shen, 2003; and Ke, 2006), Ke (2012) conducted an extensive review of the most significant studies in CFL since late 1980’s. He concluded that research in CFL has largely focused on four areas, namely, “aspects of the CFL reading process, grammar competence development, pronunciation development, pragmatic development and field building” (p. 44). He noticed a significant lack of studies in CFL listening and speaking. In addition to urging more studies from cross-linguistic background to further contribute to our understanding of Chinese L2 learning, he also calls for more research on K-12 CFL learning, learning of advanced CFL learners and the integration of their language and disciplinary study, effectiveness of CFL computer technology and the cognitive processes, attitudes and interests involved in the use of technology. Also mentioned is capacity building of CFL researchers and more funding to support future CFL research. We agree with Ke’s (2012) assessments of the research directions for CFL education. Furthermore, we identify several areas that demands greater attention in our effort to move the field forward.

**Historical Research of CFL.** Review of literature in both English and Chinese reveals a lack of attention to the historical development of CFL education in China and elsewhere in the world. In order for the field to maintain continuity and sustainability, a strong understanding of the factors that historically influence the ebbs and flows of CFL education is needed. CFL education has shown to be a bilateral process where non-native Chinese learners acquired the Chinese language but also in the process of learning the language, they contributed to the development, evolution, and dissemination of the modern Chinese language. Such a unique relationship needs to be better recognized and understood.

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Theory Building. Currently, most theories that are used to inform CFL education come from second language acquisition theories grown out of the teaching and learning of western languages. Due to the unique social, cultural, and linguistic characteristics of the Chinese language, theory building grounded in thoughtful, systematic study of the teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language is a critical task for CFL researchers and educators if we want CFL teachers and learners to achieve greater success in teaching and learning Chinese.

Affective Factors for CFL Learning. Since Chinese has been viewed a challenging language for western language learners, understanding the role of affective factors in the success of language teaching and learning in general is vital. It is important for CFL educators to pay greater attention to supporting CFL learners in developing a positive attitude toward the learning of Chinese through building internal motivation. Currently, student interest in learning CFL is heavily tied to utilitarian considerations due to the economic and political prowess that China possesses. We need to explore ways to maintain their motivation toward learning Chinese so that their interest in learning Chinese is independent of China’s political and economic conditions. We also want to see more CFL learners continue their language study beyond the beginning and intermediate levels.

CFL Teacher Preparation and Training. Teacher quality determines student success. Since CFL education is a field with a relatively short history, teacher preparation and training lags behind. Teacher quality could be problematic especially when we have to import teachers who complete their teacher education in China. Conflicts caused by differences between eastern and western cultural values, educational paradigms, instructional approaches and strategies, as well as classroom management styles can all hinder future development, sustainability, and expansion of CFL education.

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This book is a timely scholarly work that brings together experts in the field of CFL. It aims at informing its readers (e.g., CFL educators and other second language educators, policy makers, and advanced college and graduate students in CFL and other related fields) of the theories, research, policy, pedagogy, instructional materials, and motivation issues pertinent to the growth and future success of CSL programs in China as well as CFL programs in the U.S. and other parts of the world where English still maintains its dominance. It is our hope that this scholarly work becomes an important publication on CFL education.

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References


