Teaching Chinese Heritage Learners in Multicultural Frame: Preservation of Ethnic Identity and Linguistic Awareness

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Abstract

"We can model the dancer, but cannot teach dancers dance" (Kramsch 2003). This paper will focus on the ideology and pedagogical implications congruent to the instruction to Chinese heritage learners in American colleges and universities. While instructing Chinese heritage learners, the author has had an analogous experience to teaching dance: we can model the Chinese language, but we cannot teach how to be Chinese in the classroom. Outside of the classroom, the multicultural environment colors the heritage learners' world and this must not be ignored. Learning how to "language" Chinese is essential in heritage language instruction.

This can be accomplished in part by integrating linguistic and socio-cultural awareness and creativity in oral proficiencies that should be integrated into the design of language curricula for heritage learners. To do this, Byrnes' genre approach (2001) and Kramsch's discourse approach have been adopted to bring out students' creativity and further motivate them to present themselves in Chinese. Meanwhile, it is important to make heritage learners aware of the four phases of learning in order to strengthen their cognitive reasoning. These phases are: (1) know what we know, (2) know what we don't know, (3) don't know what we know, and (4) don't know what we don't know. More specifically, here knowing includes the linguistic knowledge about Mandarin Chinese and cultural domains in the texts, e.g. informational culture, ignored culture, and suppressed culture.

There are four major aspects that have been discussed in this paper: (1) pinyin instruction in relation to writing, (2) computer-assisted assignments in relation to writing; (3) correct pronunciation in reading tasks while preserving ethnic identity; (4) enhancement of formation of ethnic identity in heritage language development (Tse 1998). The ultimate goal: heritage language instruction, should provide the students a pathway to express and reassure themselves in Chinese, not merely assist learners' heritage language development. Moreover, this might bridge the cultural and ethnic awareness of oneself. Because s/he is the dancer.

I. Introduction and Multicultural Frame

This paper starts with a general discussion of the multicultural environment. Section II provides a definition of heritage language. Section III draws an analogy of Chinese heritage language as dance, and categorizes different groups of Chinese heritage learners. Section IV follows the same analogy, and deems instructors in a Chinese heritage classroom as the dance instructors modeling the Chinese heritage learners, i.e., the dancers. In Section V, the language awareness approach is discussed; this approach is used to increase the linguistic awareness among Chinese heritage learners in a language classroom. The distinction of dialectal differences is further made to address the issue of preserving the social ethnic identity in a Chinese speech community in the U.S. Section VI presents a conclusion and points out further research directions in heritage language instruction.

The linguistic landscape reveals the plurilingual/multicultural environment of the twenty-first century (Shohamy 2005)- take for example, China or Israel. In China, we see pinyin, simplified character, and English on the street signs. Nowadays, we even have to question ourselves what does it means to be a “monolingual.” This concept needs to be related to the heritage learners in a heritage language classroom. Additional questions should be raised the questions: (1) “what is the ultimate goal to instruct heritage learners within a plurilingual and multicultural frame?”; (2) “what are the components of different cultures in a heritage language classroom?” To address the first question, it is suggested that we encourage to model the heritage learners to know what they don’t know, and to facilitate them to improve and implement what they have known. Further discussion regarding the first question will be given in section IV. Before we start to model heritage learners, we ought to identify the multicultural components in a heritage language room: the cultures of the heritage learners, the culture of the target language, the cultures of an instructor, and the culture of a heritage language classroom. According to Brody (2003), a second language classroom is isolated from the target language and culture; therefore, a classroom is the only venue for students to participate in the target cultural context. The notion of a second language classroom is extended to a heritage language classroom. However, we must consider a heritage learner can interact with their parents,
grandparents, relatives and their local heritage language community outside of the conventional heritage language classroom. Similar to heritage learners, heritage language instructors in the U.S. also must engage in the heritage speech community and in U.S. cultural context. The difference is the percentile of time spent in both contexts for heritage learners and their instructors. Besides these two major cultural impacts, they also experience a third or a fourth cultural or language influence since they could have learning experience with other languages. In short, this paper asserts that the culture in a heritage language classroom is multicultural because of a multiplicity of the cultural and language experiences the heritage learners and instructors have and are exposed to.

II. Heritage Languages

Heritage languages have undergone great loss due to the fact that they are not maintained and developed (Krashen 1998). As a result, they become the victims of language shift, the phenomenon that the language of the country becomes the dominant or favorite one over the language of the family (ibid.). Per Kagan and Dillon (2001), recently the U.S. government started to recognize the immigrant/heritage languages as a national resource because heritage learners can meet the professional needs the country demands. McGinnis (2005) notes that “Chinese heritage language community has taken the lead to facilitate not merely the preservation, but also the promotion and proliferation, of Chinese language and culture” in the past few years.

The consequent critical task for the professionals and policy makers pertains to how to maintain and preserve these heritage languages. Heritage language instruction henceforward obtains its immediate attention nationwide. This shared attention perspectivizes on multi-facets of a heritage language classroom; for example, definition of heritage language learners, analogous parallelism to quasi-advanced second language learners, heritage language curricula and course design, heritage language materials, pedagogical directions, and so on.

The term “heritage speaker” refers to “a student of a language who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language” (Valdes 375). I note that Valdes’ definition specifies the speaking and listening ability of a heritage speaker, rather than the reading and writing ability. That is to say, a heritage speaker is distinct from a non-heritage speaker, but at the same time, s/he is different from a native speaker. The distinction from a non-heritage speaker asserts the professional performance of what a heritage speaker can do, and the difference from a native speaker provides a perspective for instructors to engage in heritage language instruction. This corresponds to what Kagan states, "because of their upbringing, heritage learners have the opportunity to achieve higher proficiency than other students, […] But bringing them up to speed is a challenge because their needs are unique." To address their unique needs, again we should consider Kramsch’s metaphor: were heritage speakers dancers and heritage language the dance, we instructors cannot teach them how to dance but can model their dance.

III. Chinese Heritage Language and its Learners: the Dance and the Dancers

The instructional formats of Chinese as a heritage language in the U.S. include Chinese heritage community schools, middle and high school Chinese language courses, regular Chinese language courses and heritage-track courses in the U.S. universities. These programs have different goals and achieve different aims. This paper focuses on the instruction of Chinese heritage-track courses provided in the U.S. university setting. Generally speaking, Chinese heritage-track classes are grouped into two major tracks: non-dialectal track, and dialectal track, e.g. Cantonese, Fuzhouhese, etc. Both tracks involve two types of heritage learners: no background, and with some background. This paper identifies the major pronunciation distinction made among heritage speakers from Taiwan or southern parts of Mainland China, and northern parts of mainland China so that the notion of non-dialectal track with or without prior Chinese learning experiences in China or Taiwan is advanced.

The ones without prior China or Taiwan learning experience are not literate or fluently conversant, and usually code-switch back and forth in English; the ones with some exposure are more fluent, but not literate. However, one can easily identify which home country their parents come from by some distinct articulation habits these heritage learners carry. What can we, as instructors, do with their articulation habits? Is it practical and possible to perpetuate them into another group of vernacular speakers that are different from their parents’ vernaculars? To what extent can instructors model and facilitate this type of heritage learners?

IV. Chinese Heritage Language Instruction: Modeling the Dancer

The author’s teaching philosophy corresponds to what Kramsch expresses, "we [language instructors] can model the dancer, but cannot teach dancers dance"(2003). In order to model the heritage learners progress as well as make them aware of their cognitive reasoning, four phases of learning are established. These four phases are: (1) know what we know, (2) know what we don't know, (3) don't know what we know, and (4) don't know what we don't know. Chinese heritage
language learners contains several special groups that need to be made aware of their strengths and weaknesses in a language classroom. To accommodate their experiences in these learning phases, the author introduces the Mandarin Chinese dialectal variation, and assert the standard Mandarin Chinese is the criterion in a heritage language classroom. A student’s speech is correlated to the Mandarin Chinese norm. The resultant students’ dialectal variation is used to make the learners recognize their differences in articulation habits, e.g., zh-, ch-, sh-, r- and some syntactic variation, e.g., 有沒有 yǒu-méi-yǒu +VP construction. At last, the learners (dancers) are made to know that they know their language (dance), and know that they can utilize their Chinese language as a means to express their ideas, imagination, creativity and emotion.

This process of knowing includes the linguistic knowledge about Mandarin Chinese and cultural domains in the texts, e.g. informational culture, (or factual) behavioral culture, and achievement (or accomplishment) culture (Hammerly 1982: 513-5). Learning to identify different components of culture can accommodate their cultural competence and further their language skills. How to facilitate the learners to language in Chinese becomes the ultimate goal of what instructors in a Chinese heritage classroom should be aware of. I use Swain’s the notion of “languaging” (2005) because her notion of “languaging” is a cognitive tool, similar to my four phases of cognitive reasoning. She defines “languaging” as the concept at learners as agents make decisions, develop problem-solving skills, and are able to operate the meaning. The ultimate goal of training Chinese heritage learners is to develop their Chinese skills, become autonomous learners, further reassure and channel themselves in Chinese in order to function properly in a Chinese speech community or society.

This can be accomplished in part by integrating linguistic and socio-cultural awareness. To do this, pinyin instruction is seen as a tool to improve pronunciation and in addition to providing effective tools in online assignments and typed writing assignments. In relation to writing, computer-assisted assignments reinforce the skills in word recognition and linguistic awareness on abundant homonyms in Mandarin Chinese. Moreover, correct pronunciation is central in reading tasks while preserving ethnic identity in terms of pronunciation as dialect awareness and socio-cultural understanding in oral proficiency performance, viz. retroflex zh-, ch-, sh-, r-. Instructors should teach Chinese heritage learners in standard retroflex pronunciation, and also enhance students’ dialectal awareness.

To re-enforce students’ retroflex pronunciation, more points are taken off in their reading tasks as pronunciation drills if they do not make retroflex sounds. In other aspects, the tendency is to focus more on developing Chinese language skills rather than pronunciation error correction. It is understood and respected that this major distinction of retroflex pronunciation is not only a product of diverse dialectal variations but also a symbol of regional ethnic identity preservation.

V. Linguistic Awareness and Ethnic Identity

Briggs introduces Long’s challenge to the dominant view regarding the language differences as a problem. Briggs states, “dominant ideologies construe language differences as a “problem” created by “minority groups” that upsets a homogeneous, stable, and monolingual linguistico-political foundation” (2003: xv). Long (2003) challenges this view and suggests that “Ebonics” is correspondent to the emergence of New Right and the underlying wave of racial oppression. He considers the phenomenon of “linguistic discrimination”, or “linguicism” (2003: 155) increasingly unacceptable by those who value individual variation and linguistic diversity. Here the same voice is advocated to illustrate the articulation differences as the phenomenon of linguistic diversity among Chinese heritage learners whose parents are southern vernacular speakers and northern vernacular speakers. We think instructors should train the northern southern vernacular learners to practice retroflex zh-, ch-, sh-, and r- in the reading and pinyin tasks, which are aimed to improve their fossilized tendency to pronounce non-retroflex sounds z-, c-, s-. However, we disagree with the approach to punish those adult heritage learners who cannot pronounce these retroflex sounds by grading. Linguistic and dialectal awareness should be made aware, but not imposed upon because this special group of learners are after all “heritage” learners who inherit phonological, syntactic, and lexical differences from their home or speech community.

Tse (1998) proposes four stages of ethnic identity formation and suggests its implication for heritage language development. These four stages are: (1) unawareness; (2) ethnic ambivalence/ evasion; (3) ethnic emergence; (4) ethnic identity incorporation. A Chinese heritage learner explores and incorporates a great deal of ethnic identity formation throughout the process of Chinese as a heritage language acquisition. When learners enroll in a Chinese heritage class, they start their heritage identity journey of self-exploration through the means of language. Most heritage learners expressed their motivation to learn Chinese is the desire to communicate well with their grandparents, parents, or cousins overseas; at the same time, they enroll in classes under Asian American Studies. This information indicates the correlation to Tse’s stage four: ethnic identity incorporation. One Chinese American Stephanie Hom states,

“As I continue to learn about my cultural heritage and our place in white America I am discovering an entirely new world unknown to me before. There are people out there, Asian American writers, community leaders, actors and actresses who are addressing me in a language I can understand” (Tse 1998: 26).
What we cannot deny from the quote is that how close of a same tongue or language can one heritage speaker relates to the other. Then, what is the instructors’ position to take away that “closeness” created within the speech community, be it southern vernacular or northern vernacular Mandarin Chinese. Isn’t it part of a language instructor’s responsibility to pass the knowledge of Chinese language and culture to the heritage learners or we simply try to impose the political bias created among different Chinese dialectal speech communities, even among the different speech groups of Chinese instructors?

VI. Conclusion

“Culture as knowledge, both overt and covert” (Brody 2003: 45). While instructing Chinese heritage learners, we should equip them with not only better language skills but also cultural knowledge of their heritage language. To do this, we aim to model the Chinese heritage learners to improve their phonological and syntactic structures of Chinese, to make aware of their cognitive reasoning toward the implicit cultural components embedded in the language context, to identify the dialectal awareness, to assist them through the process of ethnic identity incorporation. In a heritage language classroom, we consider the role of instructors as the dance instructors and the learners the dancers. We can model them how to dance, but cannot teach them how to be a dancer. Instructors of a Chinese heritage language should monitor and facilitate learners along the language learning and acquisition process, but should not instruct them how to be Chinese, - because they are dancers.

References


