NEW MANDARIN SETTINGS FOR NEWCOMERS: A CASE OF A CHINESE LANGUAGE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, Mandarin teaching strategies of Chinese language schools in the United States underwent several changes to accommodate the growing number of students with Chinese heritage who cannot speak Mandarin fluently. This study aims at exploring the Mandarin listening policy of a Chinese language school as it welcomes these newcomers. Utilizing case study as its research design, the current paper examined the language policy in two areas: language practices and language beliefs. It selected from the school one teacher, the class this teacher taught, two non-Mandarin-speaking students in this class, the parents of these two students, and four school administrators as participants in a language school in New York City. Participant observation, interviews, and document collection were used as data gathering methods. The findings indicated that two major listening activities were present when teaching Mandarin to these new students namely: (1) listening to textbook CDs, and (2) watching various Mandarin language movie DVDs. Given that, the school established a Mandarin environment where these new students could more easily understand Mandarin messages with the help of visual contexts, such as textbook pictures and videos with English subtitles.

Keywords: language policy, Chinese language school, non-Mandarin-speaking, Chinese heritage, listening

INTRODUCTION

The increase of non-Mandarin speaking students with Chinese descent among Chinese language schools in the United States of America was a new phenomenon since the 1990's (Lai, 2004; Lee, 1996). Despite all these students have a Chinese background; they cannot speak fluently either a non-Mandarin Chinese dialect or English. That circumstance has brought new challenges to these schools which teach Chinese in Mandarin (Lai, 2004). The major challenges of these institutions are the students' limited Mandarin speaking ability and their non-Mandarin home language environments (Lee, 1996). Besides, these newcomers also came from different cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, they are listening to Chinese as a heritage language (Lee, 1996; Peyton et al., 2008).

Facing these new challenges, many Chinese language schools have adopted new measures to meet the listening needs of these non-Mandarin-speaking students with Chinese descent (Lee, 1996). These strategies cover two parts: (1) the schools' classroom listening practices; and (2) the schools' beliefs about how to teach listening to these students. Teachers and administrators have to implement this new student body. Thus far, there have been no universal standards for these schools' adaptations in Chinese listening (Lai, 2004; Lee, 1996). Consequently, the actions

taken often vary from one school to another dependent on each school's thoughts and approaches when coping with these challenges.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to explore how a Chinese language school in the U.S. teaches Mandarin listening comprehension when it faces an increasing number of non-Mandarin-speaking students with Chinese descent on its classroom. These teaching practices, according to Spolsky's (2004) language policy theoretical framework, can be defined as *language practices*. In the same way, *language practices* are shaped by the school's *language beliefs*. In this section, previous literature regarding language policy theories and the context of the current study will be discussed.

Spolsky's Language Policy Theory

Spolsky (2004) asserted that language policy theory works in this study as a framework for examining one Chinese language school's language policy adaptations, i.e. its language practices and its language beliefs. The Chinese language school's language practices mainly refer to its teaching/learning practices in Mandarin listening, particularly taking into account its Chinese-heritage non-Mandarin-speaking students. As for its language beliefs, they include the beliefs in the insertion of the Chinese-heritage non-Mandarin-speaking students by all stakeholders, including school administrators, teachers, parents, and students. As a result, the school itself was the focus when scrutinizing the school's language policies and the forces that shape, implement, and fine-tune these language practices to satisfy the requests of the school's Chinese-heritage non-Mandarin students.

Although there are studies that have addressed language practices and language beliefs separately, there are no studies that look at these two components simultaneously, or that have looked at how these two parts are affected by a student body different from the one which the school used to teach. There have been some studies done on listening practices at Chinese language schools including the teaching of listening (He, 2001) and the use of listening strategies (Chi, 1989). There have been researches about their language beliefs (Higgins & Sheldon, 2001; Lao, 2004). However, none of these studies has brought together the two dimensions, nor explored the interactions between them.

Review of the Literature on Language Policy

Numerous studies on language policy were conducted by researchers from 1960s up to present. There are several stages during this long period: the first stage, from 1960s to 1970s, had seen Haugen (1959) as the first researcher to use the term *language planning*, the mostly used term among many for *language policy* when discussing "the form of choices among available linguistic forms" (p. 8). This definition, however, was narrowly focused on the forms and syntax of a language (Hornberger, 2006), aimed at the modernization in developing countries (Ricento, 2006; Tollefson, 2002a). Later at the same stage, other scholars also provided similar definitions of *language planning* (Fishman, Ferguson, & Das Gupta, 1968; Rubin & Jernudd, 1971), seeing it as language-problem-solving at the national level. Meanwhile, scholars also witnessed the emerging use of *language policy* (Neustupny, 1968) and *language development* (Ferguson, 1968). Again, modernization of a language and language problems solving were emphasized in these two terms.

In between the period of 1970's and 1980's or the second stage, scholars found the definitions of language policy, limited and recognized that language planning included linguistic, social, economic, and political factors. For example, Cooper (1989) thinks a theory of social change needs to be developed, which thought could be seen in his book titled, *Language Planning and Social Change*. Also, Tollefson's (1991) historical-structural approach emphasized that it was necessary to look at people's political stance.

As the third or the present stage started in the mid-1980's when communism collapsed and the globe became smaller, the meanings and terms connected to language policy also changed. For instance, Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) focused on local situations when defining language planning, a shift from earlier emphasis on national-level planning. Likewise, scholars redirect their attention to how social inequality and language policy under the impact of globalization were connected to each other (Tollefson, 2002b).

The Status of the Chinese Language in the World

As China's economy has been rising since the 1990's, so has the status of its language in the world (Ding, 2008; Lo Bianco, 2007). Lo Bianco (2007) points out that Asia has been the region where learning Chinese has been the "strongest" (p. 5). Ding (2008) even says that, as a language for business around the Pacific Rim, Chinese is becoming more popular. Meanwhile, statistics showed that there are more than 30 million learners in more than 100 countries learning Chinese as a foreign language (Chang, 2006).

In Asia, at the elementary- and secondary-school levels, Thailand and South Korea has been offering Chinese lessons since 2007 (Erard, 2006). Singapore also has a policy of nurturing a team of Chinese elites who are bilingual and have a firm grip of Chinese "culture, history and contemporary developments" (Matthew, Krishnamurti, & Sevic, 2005, p. 46).

In addition, Chinese courses are available in various levels of education systems in different countries. For example, in the Asia-Pacific region, Australia has been promoting Chinese at its middle and primary schools since the mid-1980's (Lin, 1995). In Europe, at the middle school level, a French government official was assigned to promote Chinese in 2006 (Chang, 2006).

The Status of the Chinese Language in the U.S.

According to the US Department of Education, approximately 24,000 elementary and secondary school students in the U.S. are learning Chinese (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Moreover, the Modern Language Association (MLA) points out that in 2002, 34,153 students were enrolled in various Chinese courses at college or a higher level (Welles, 2004).

These two numbers, nevertheless, have not shown the actual number of students at Chinese language schools in the U.S. Two additional numbers should be taken into account here. One is the number of students from the National Council of Association of Chinese Language Schools (NCACLS) and the other from the Chinese School Association in the United States (CSAUS). Presently, the NCACLS (NCACLS, 2006) has about 100,000 and the CSAUS 60,000 (CSAUS, 2007).   All these numbers, including the US official and MLA ones, when taken together, constitute about 200,000 Chinese language learners in the U.S.

In the mainstream U.S. education system, steps have been taken to enhance the learning of Chinese. For example, the AP Chinese test programs have been initiated in 2007 by the College Board (College Board, 2006). Furthermore, the U.S. education system acknowledged that it is

necessary to promote the learning of foreign languages, including Chinese (Crookes, 1997; Welles, 2004). Also, during the 2004-2008 Bush administration, the Department of Education had a Foreign Language Assistance Program budget of 24 million dollars to promote the learning of critical languages, including Chinese (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

The Chinese Language School in the U.S.

Earlier studies on CHL learning at Chinese language schools in the U.S. focus primarily on difficulties in teaching English-dominant Chinese-heritage students (Lin, 1998; Wang, 1995). Lin (1998) compares bilingual children with pseudo-bilingual children who are learning Mandarin while picking up English. He finds that the Chinese language school, as a Mandarin-speaking environment, is critical for the success of these children's Mandarin learning. Wang (1995) examines the issue of the students' language shift when attending Chinese language schools. He finds that these students usually show a tendency of gradually becoming English dominant once they start attending school.

However, these schools may provide multilingual practices when teaching CHL to its increasing Chinese-heritage non-Mandarin-speaking students (García, 2009). The following section will discuss the multilingual approach.

The multilingual approach in the Chinese Language School in the U.S.

Based on García's (2009) analysis, two types of multilingual approaches are used in Chinese language schools: 1.) preview/view/review; and 2.) co-languaging. Both of these approaches have bilingual practices which are seen more at Chinese language schools. A discussion of these two approaches will follow.

Preview/view/review. Preview/view/review mainly refers to the language exchange between two languages in a language classroom where use of the two languages depends on the progress of the lesson (García, 2009). For example, the teacher will use L1 to explain the lesson he/she will teach, play the CD of the lesson in L2, and then use L1 to review the lesson just taught.

Co-languaging. Co-languaging provides the same content through different languages and through technology. For instance, a teacher may play a movie DVD in L1 with L2 subtitle or caption.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

This study examines the language practices in and beliefs about teaching Mandarin listening comprehension at one Chinese language school in the U.S. by investigating the interactions between, as well as the content of, the school's language practices and language beliefs. As such, this study will attempt to answer the following questions:

Research Question I

How does a Chinese language school adapt its language practices in teaching listening comprehension to deal with the increasing number of these students in its classrooms?

Research Question II

How do the school's language beliefs shape its decisions of teaching listening comprehension in relation to the increasing number of these students in its classrooms?

PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY

Research Design

The present study used case study as the research method given that retrospective data were given due consideration. The researcher examined a Chinese language school's practices of and beliefs in Mandarin listening through participant observation, interviews, and documents.

Population of the Study

The researcher chose the bilingual class in Li Xing Chinese Language School in New York City because it had the largest number of non-Mandarin-speaking students with Chinese heritage. It has 15 non-Mandarin-speaking students with Chinese heritage, whose ages ranged from 10 to 14. These students met every Saturday morning for three hours. Among them, nine were Cantonese-speaking, two were Fuzhou-speaking, and four were English-speaking of Chinese heritage.

Data-Gathering Procedures

To explore these two language policy components, the research employed three major data collection methods in a case study: (a) participant observation; (b) interviews; and (c) document collection (Merriam, 1998).

a. **Participant Observation**

The classroom observation at Li Xing[1] lasted for one semester. The researcher spent three hours per Saturday morning at Li Xing to observe the classroom activities in Mr. Wang's bilingual class. The author took field notes of classroom activities in order to find the patterns of Mr. Wang's and the students' practices in Mandarin listening and their interactions. Also, videotaping was used to pinpoint more details of non-Mandarin-speaking students' classroom practices. Data collected through participant observation would then serve as the basis for later interviews with the teacher, students, students' parents, and administrators.

b. **Interviews**

The researcher interviewed four types of participants in this study: the teacher, Mr. Wang, two non-Mandarin-speaking students, two parents of the two non-Mandarin-speaking students selected, and three school administrators. The author interviewed the teacher, Mr. Wang, in order to understand Mr. Wang's background, teaching experience, and beliefs about teaching Chinese. As for the two focal non-Mandarin-speaking students, they were interviewed individually to reveal their beliefs about how Mandarin was taught. Similarly, two parents of the two non-Mandarin-speaking students were interviewed to explore why they registered their children for the Chinese language school and their beliefs about how well the school taught their children. Lastly, three administrators were interviewed to understand their backgrounds and their beliefs in teaching Mandarin listening.

c. **Document Collection**

Documents, including examination sheets, school notes, and handouts (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) were collected at the Chinese language school.

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[1]   Li Xing and all other names are pseudonyms for the school and participants of this study.

RESULTS

This section discusses the major findings of the study. When analyzing and comparing data collected from the school site, the researcher found the following two major patterns of teaching/learning Mandarin listening at Li Xing: One was the emphasis on listening through textbook CDs and the other listening training through watching movie DVDs with English subtitle. Both patterns will be discussed below.

Pattern 1: Emphasizing Listening through Textbook CDs

The first pattern found at Li Xing in terms of teaching/learning Mandarin listening was listening to a textbook CD. The textbook CD was designed to align with the teaching of the texts and example sentences. With the help of the CD, the teacher could teach listening and speaking throughout. In fact, textbook CD listening was the most frequently seen activity in the bilingual classroom observed, in which students had the opportunity to repeat after the CD. Many of the participants in this study had mentioned the indispensability of this listening-repeating activity. For example, the vice principal indicated that:

"學生聽不懂、不會說，就不容易記得這個字，連寫都沒興趣了。"

["If students don't understand what they hear and cannot speak, it will not be easy for them to remember the words and they will eventually lose the interest to write the words."]

The teacher, Mr. Wang, further pointed out the most important activity he always did in his class—listening to and repeating the texts from the textbook:

……CD就是聽歌嘛…然後DVD是每一課後面那幾個副課文，可以一句一句的教學生跟著唸……如果學生聽了會跟著唸就已經很厲害了。

["Listening to songs of texts in the CD for the textbook…and the sub-texts in the DVD for the textbook, I can teach students to repeat sentence by sentence…. If my students can repeat the text from the textbook after they hear it, they are already excellent."]

Also, Evelyn, one of the two students interviewed, talked about the benefit of CD listening activities. She said, "I think it is a good idea to help students understand what he is teaching by playing a CD in class."

As for the parents, they both thought that it was a good idea to emphasize listening to Mandarin. One parent, Ella, even mentioned that the main reason why she sent her child to Li Xing was to provide her child with more exposure to Mandarin. She said that:

把小孩送來學中文，就是因為……在我們住的附近講國語的人比較多，所以我覺得我的小孩應該學一點國語。另外，也因為我們是中國人。……學國語主要就是靠聽，……在這裡(勵興)會…強迫自己去聽國語，學的比較快。

[The reason why I send my child here to learn Chinese is because……in our neighborhood, there are more Mandarin-speaking people, so I think that my child should learn a little Mandarin. Besides, it's also because we are Chinese……To learn Mandarin……it depends mainly on listening to Mandarin……here (Li Xing) she will……learn faster by forcing herself to listen to Mandarin.]

The other parent, Vicky, also talked about giving her child more chances to listen to Mandarin and pointed out that more listening worked for her child:

我在我小孩很小三、四歲的時候，剛會聽兒歌的時候，就……買了一些台灣的童話故事書的錄音帶給他聽，講國語的。……我在車上都讓他聽國語的歌。……到了力行以後，……Veronica

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是學的比較快，……如果要教他好的國語，就要給他聽正的國語……所以我說，這個中文學校很好，所以我無論如何都會繼續讓他學。

["Just when my daughter was three or four years old, when she could listen to nursery songs, I……bought some tapes of children's books made in Taiwan and let her listen to them. These tapes were in Mandarin……I would also let her listen to Mandarin songs in my care……After Veronica starts attending Li Xing……she does learn faster……if you want to teach her the good Mandarin, then you need to provide her the right Mandarin……so that's why I say this Chinese language school is good. So I will continue to let her learn at this school."]

On each Saturday morning, the teacher first played the textbook CD for his students to listen to. Then, he let them repeat after the CD more than one time. For example, he would say:

一、二、三，ready？(Mr. Wang started playing the CD.) "沙灘上，雪地裡，一個接一個……"

["One, two, three, ready? (Mr. Wang started playing the CD.) (Voice from CD) "On the beach, on the snow-covered ground, one after another……"]

For another example, the teacher emphasized the activity of listening to the CD and then repeating after the CD:

好，現在聽CD，然後跟著唸。(播放課本CD。)

["O.K. Now, listen to the CD and repeat."] ["Played the CD for the textbook."]

現在聽CD。(CD播放的聲音：'你為什麼一會兒開燈，一會兒關燈？')

[Now listen to the CD.] ([Voice from the CD: "Why do you turn on the light and then turn it off?"])

Pattern 2: Emphasizing Listening through Watching Mandarin Movie DVDs

The second finding was that the school also emphasized Mandarin listening by letting its Chinese-heritage non-Mandarin-speaking students watch Mandarin movie DVDs.

Mr. Wang said that, "學生要注意聽影片說什麼，考他們的聽力、理解力。"

["Students need to listen carefully to what is said in the film. This is to test their listening comprehension."].

The researcher noticed that in most of the classes observed, Mandarin movie DVDs were played. Moreover, Mr. Wang indicated that the use of Mandarin-language movie DVDs was the most successful way for enhancing non-Mandarin-speaking students' listening ability:

"這麼多的教學法裡面，以放映DVD的影片最有效，放了之後他們就會去follow。……我把主題跟生活連在一起…會問學生影片的意義。……這些課外的東西，他們聽了以後不會忘記的。"

[In so many teaching methods, playing Mandarin-language movie DVDs is the most effective one. Once you play the movie, the students will just follow what is going on……I will connect the topic of the movie with students' life experience……and ask them about the meaning of the movie……they won't forget……what they hear in these extracurricular activities (movies).]

This statement was further sustained by the two students interviewed. One student, Evelyn, said that:

"I can understand a little bit more about what the teacher is saying by looking at the film."

The other student, Veronica, even mentioned that she felt particularly touched by one documentary film on the charity issues in China:

"I feel most impressed by……the one (film) that shows the small kid with a small lead,

writing her homework."

Relationship between Practices and Beliefs

Based on the previous section of findings that highlighted the developing patterns of Mandarin listening activities for non-Mandarin-speaking students at Li Xing, this section will use Spolsky's (2004) language policy theory, especially his theory on language practice and language beliefs, to further analyze collected data. This section will first discuss the adaptations of language practices at Li Xing. It will then discuss the school's beliefs about teaching Mandarin listening and how these beliefs influence its language practices. Therefore, this section is divided into two parts:

(1) adaptations in language practices;

(2) language beliefs that shape the language practices decisions.

The School's Adaptations in Language Practices

Li Xing stressed the importance of teaching Mandarin listening by integrating it into the school's pedagogy. This way of teaching Mandarin listening will be discussed below.

Listening and the Learning Material

Emphasizing listening comprehension at Li Xing would become most explainable when we look at the benefit of bringing a Mandarin-language environment to the non-Mandarin-speaking students at Li Xing. This was so because these students did not own a natural environment at home where they could practice listening to Mandarin. However, their parents wrote some Chinese. Consequently, more opportunities to listen to Mandarin became the teacher's number one mission.

One factor that could have interfered with the outcome of listening to Mandarin materials, i.e. textbook CDs and various Mandarin movie DVDs, was the non-Mandarin-speaking students' age—they were older students between 10 and 14. Li Xing knew very well about this limitation and pointed out that English was a necessary tool to keep these older students coming to school. The teacher, Mr. Wang, solved this problem with a special method—playing various Mandarin movie DVDs with English and Chinese subtitles. According to the researcher's field notes, non-Mandarin-speaking students could better understand the movies through English subtitles while listening to Mandarin messages.

Language Beliefs and Their Shaping of Language Practices

This section will describe the language beliefs about listening and then analyze their impact on the school's language practices.

The Importance of Listening Comprehension for Second Language Acquisition

The school believed that language is best learned when messages are first understood. Therefore, Mandarin teaching has to enhance listening comprehension. Li Xing's administrators and the teacher all believed that listening should be prioritized when teaching Chinese to non-Mandarin-speaking students. For example, the principal said that:

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這些孩子因為平常聽不到中文，就變成不會講中文……所以老師的責任就是要讓他多聽。他如果聽到的都是英文，那幹嘛要用中文呢？

["These kids don't listen to Chinese much in their daily life. So they don't speak Chinese……so the teacher's responsibility is to let them listen to Chinese more. If all they hear is all English, why bother using Chinese?"]

Another administrator, Ms. Yu, also mentioned a similar belief that:

他如果會聽，然後會說，我在講解的時候，他很快可以吸收。

[If they have the listening comprehension ability, and then they can speak Chinese, then when I am teaching in class, they can absorb what I teach quickly.]

The teacher, Mr. Wang, also believed that listening should be emphasized over speaking, reading, and writing as he said that:

我教課……基本上以放CD或DVD為主，CD就是聽有課文的歌嘛，可以一句一句的教學生聽，再跟著唸。DVD的影片最有效……這些……是他們聽了以後不會忘記的。

["I teach……basically by playing CDs or DVDs. CDs have Chinese texts with songs. I can teach students to listen to them and repeat after the CD sentence by sentence. DVDs are the most effective tool……these activities...once they hear it, they will never forget."]

The Influence of the Importance of Listening Comprehension on Language Practices

Li Xing's bilingual class teacher would typically play the textbook CD to start his Saturday mornings, an activity clearly impacted by the belief in the priority of listening to Mandarin, followed by repeating the CD and queries on its content. The teacher believed that a good non-Mandarin-speaking student fluent in Mandarin should be able to understand a question in Mandarin and then answer it in English. He also stated that he played various Mandarin movie DVDs with English subtitles in order to train his non-Mandarin-speaking students to understand spoken Mandarin messages in different contexts in the movie. During the participant observation period, two thirds of the classes had seen the playing of Mandarin-language movie DVDs in the bilingual class.

What this section makes clear is that it is language beliefs that drive language practices. While the school adapted language practices based on the characteristics of the community, of the children, of the teacher, and of the instructional material, these in turn were shaped by the beliefs of the school.

DISCUSSION

Listening comprehension was prioritized when Mr. Wang taught his Chinese-heritage non-Mandarin-speaking students in the bilingual class. This language practice was supported by Krashen's (1985; 2003) concept of *comprehensible input*. Krashen (1985) postulates that people acquire a language "by understanding messages or by receiving comprehensible input" (p. 2). Krashen (1998) further indicated that providing comprehensible input that is not conveniently available outside the classroom may best facilitate heritage language speakers' development in their heritage language. In particular, "aural comprehensible input" was listed by Krashen (2003, p. 7) as the first method to be used in a language classroom. Also, this activity priority received support from other studies, which either focuses on the priority of listening (Nida, 1982) or

confirms that listening activities can help comprehension of a second language (Vandergrift, 2003), such as the class in this study.

Furthermore, pictures from the textbooks, body movements, and teacher/student demonstrations, as well as videos, were also used to enhance non-Mandarin-speaking students' listening comprehension. The pictures, body movements, and demonstrations were what Krashen (2003) calls *context* which helps to make aural learning materials such as textbook CDs and various movie DVDs more comprehensible.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Chinese language schools in the U.S. have come up with two types of adaptations in their Mandarin teaching at the school site when dealing with an influx of Chinese-heritage non-Mandarin-speaking students. One adaptation is listening to textbook CDs while the other one is watching Mandarin movie DVDs with English subtitles.

While the diversity in the student body has provided schools with the flexibility to adapt, the school also believes in the importance of establishing a Mandarin environment where aural messages can be understood with the help of visual contexts such as textbook pictures and videos. Such circumstances served as the reasons why the teacher always starts his Saturday morning Mandarin class by playing the textbook CDs, followed by other activities. Also, these would account for the reasons why the teacher sees Mandarin movie DVDs with English subtitles as most effective for enhancing the Mandarin listening comprehension of his English-dominant and non-Mandarin-speaking students.

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