

International Chinese Language Teaching in the Post-Pandemic Era: Searching for More Possibilities, Enhancing International Cooperation

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Abstract

The sudden outbreak of the world-wide pandemic has greatly influenced the way that foreign language classes are organized and presented in different countries all over the world, including that of the international Chinese language classes, namely, those for teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages. Except for frustrations and difficulties, new challenges in the post-pandemic era also bring us more opportunities for innovation and development. When it comes to international Chinese language teaching, more possibilities for further progress could be searched from the perspectives of teaching materials, teaching processes and teachers' professional development based on further enhancement of win-win cooperations between China and the countries where Chinese language is taught.

Key words: International Chinese language teaching; International cooperation; Teaching materials; Teaching processes; Teachers' professional development

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With the rapid development of globalization in recent decades, international Chinese language teaching, which refers to teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages (Zhang, 2014), namely Chinese language teaching in other

countries than China or to foreign learners other than Chinese, has come to be thriving and prosperous. More and more countries have started to add Chinese language into school curriculum, providing Chinese language classes to students from primary schools to universities. A great number of Chinese language teachers from China goes to different parts of the world through various international academic or business programs for exchange or cooperation with local Chinese language teachers in foreign countries to bring about the utmost teaching effect and learning experience to learners.

Yet, the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 has suddenly changed the normal life pattern of everyone throughout the whole world. Since shutdown and quarantine are found to be the efficient way to deal with the health crisis, teachers at all levels have suddenly found themselves thrust into teaching online. Distance teaching and learning has become the new normal, even when teachers are still working on the most efficient and effective way for synchronous or asynchronous remote delivery of their courses. A great number of international exchange or cooperation programs have been canceled or postponed, giving way to the top priority of keeping the safety and health of global residents. This has brought new challenges for the development of international Chinese language teaching throughout the world. On the one hand, for those countries where Chinese language teaching newly starts without long history or much experience, promoting the localization of Chinese language teaching enjoys the top priority, i.e. combining Chinese language teaching with the actual situation of the target country where the language is taught, taking local factors as the practical national situations or cultural elements into consideration of the teaching process to find the most suitable way that Chinese language could be taught in the local area and build up the local teaching system for Chinese language from the aspects of teaching materials, teaching processes and teachers training (Lv, 2014;

Zhang, 2014; Zhou, 2018). On the other hand, for those countries which have a relatively long history of Chinese language teaching and have come to form their own teaching system, further development could be accelerated by enhancing international cooperation between China and the target countries where Chinese is taught, from the following aspects of teaching materials, teaching processes and teachers' professional development.

1. PROMOTING FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHING MATERIALS

Chinese has been found in the school curriculum as a choice of foreign language compulsory in a lot of countries in recent decades, from secondary school to higher education. The teaching materials currently employed by teachers comes from 2 main resources, the textbooks and its relevant materials written and published in the target countries where the language is taught, and the textbooks and its relevant materials written and published in China. Quite often, the teachers found it hard for a single set of textbooks to meet the classroom needs, with those written and published in their own country probable lack of either authenticity of language, timeliness or systematicity and continuity of the textbooks (Luo, 2010a; Zhu, 2010), and those written and published in China probable lack of either vitality and interestingness or relevant supporting online materials to inspire full participation of learners at various ages both in and after class. Thus, quite a number of teachers resorts to self-edited teaching materials from diversified resources based on the learners' conditions and teaching requirement of their own, which has brought great inconvenience to teachers' preparation for classes, not to mention those technological challenges teachers have to manage today when it comes to synchronous or asynchronous distance teaching.

Take the textbooks of Chinese language in the U.S. as an example, there are much more choices for Chinese textbooks for 7-12 compared with those for K-6, with only a few as *My First Chinese Words* (K-3), *Kids Interactive Chinese: Home, Sweet Home* (K-3), *My First Chinese Reader* (2-5), etc. Yet, more choices are provided for Chinese language teaching in high school, to meet the need of SAT II and AP tests, such as *Discovering Chinese* (6-12), *Magical Tour of China* (6-12), *Huanying: An Invitation to Chinese* (9-12), *Strive for a 5 AP: Chinese Practice Tests --- AP Chinese Practice Tests*, *Integrated Chinese, Beyond the Basics*, *Taiwan Today*, *A New Text for a Modern China*, *Across the Straits*, *Chinese Primer*, *Chinese Link*, etc. (Luo, 2010b; Luo, Zhang & Jiang, 2013; Zhu, 2010). However, when it comes to higher education, *Integrated Chinese*, *Chinese Link*, *Beyond the Basics* are still the textbooks commonly used for freshmen and sophomores to lay the language foundation.

As about junior or senior, diversified teaching materials may be edited and employed by the college professors according to the need of each individual class, with frequent instruction of "No specific textbooks" in the syllabus found on Blackboard (Luo & Zhang, 2012). In face of the Chinese language teaching and learning in the post-pandemic era, it's time to promote the localization or the new development of teaching materials further via international cooperation between China and the target countries where Chinese is being taught.

1.1 Keeping Authenticity and Vitality of the Teaching Materials

Foreign languages teaching in China is usually taken as a project, divided into different courses as intensive reading, listening and speaking, extensive reading, writing, etc., especially for language majors. Whereas, Chinese as a foreign language taught in other countries is often taken as one comprehensive course, with parallel practicing and cultivating learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities at the same time. Therefore, textbooks for teaching Chinese as a foreign language written and published in China usually concentrate on developing learners' Chinese competence with emphasis on one or two aspects of language proficiency, which couldn't satisfy the need for comprehensive Chinese learning in foreign countries. Besides, when it comes to international Chinese language teaching in China, teachers and learners are more used to paper versions of various teaching or learning materials, with relatively more diversified options and convenient availability in the native context of the language.

As we all know, a set of fully-developed textbooks for any foreign languages written and published has to stand the test of time before it becomes warmly welcomed and widely accepted, at the cost of witnessing the gradual loss of timeliness and hence the gradual loss of authenticity of the language, as language is evolving with the advancement of time and society. Just take one of the most popular Chinese textbooks in the U.S. *Integrated Chinese* as an example, it was first published in 1997, with the latest edition published in 2008. There are great changes for the language used in daily life now compared with that used more than a decade ago, when there were no such terms as "high-speed train" or "food ordering and delivery" or "Alipay" in daily life in China.

In this way, with conspicuous features of each own, textbooks compiled by teachers or scholars either in China or in foreign countries alone could no longer meet the needs of large groups of nowadays learners of international Chinese language. Hence, the cooperation of the professionals on compilation of teaching materials between China and the target country could serve as an advisable way to bring about the most suitable and effective textbooks.

The professionals in the target country could figure out the topics which the target learners are most interested in based on either observation or survey. Then, the bilateral cooperation starts with the professionals in China providing the most authentic language materials and the professionals in the target country working out the most suitable way that the language is presented, exercised, practiced and grasped in accordance with local characteristics of the learners and the class organization in the target country, so that the learners' interest and participation could be stimulated to the utmost in the future learning process.

In addition, adequate online supporting teaching and learning materials, such as the corresponding teachers' handbooks or students' workbooks or various supplementary materials for students' self-learning either online or offline, should be developed with the textbooks at the same time to meet the need of diversified learning and teaching today. Teaching materials for Chinese language developed via cooperation of the professionals from both China and the target country may best take the advantages of both sides to bring about efficient teaching and learning. Of course, frequent update is very necessary to keep pace with the evolution of both the society and the language.

1.2 Keeping Continuity of the Teaching Materials

With the popularity of Chinese language study as a foreign language in more and more countries, it's time to switch the focus of teaching materials development from short term to long term development. Instead of being fragmented and utility-oriented, serving for one or two certain tests or specific purposes, the compilation and publishing of teaching materials are also supposed to take into consideration the full development of learners' language proficiency in the long run to provide extensive choices within coherent system for both teachers and learners at different levels so as to guarantee the continual development of learners' language proficiency.

Based on the explicit description of the standards for foreign language education in each country, series of textbooks at different levels are supposed to be compiled in succession within a continuous system to help learners at different ages improve their Chinese proficiency progressively. In this way, the development of teaching materials at a certain level wouldn't flock while that of those for other levels get blocked, leaving fewer choices for the teachers and learners at that level. Probably, in the U.S., more teaching materials for Chinese language teaching need to be developed for the learners at the elementary level and higher education level to provide more choices for teachers and learners within a gradual and progressive system for language proficiency development.

1.3 Keeping Diversity of the Teaching Materials

When promoting further development of teaching materials, the various teaching objectives for a great variety of learners should also be taken into consideration. At the stage of elementary or compulsory education, apart from the different ages of the learners at school, there are heritage learners who come from families with Chinese heritage, and learners who pick up Chinese as a foreign language out of personal interest or to meet the requirement of college entrance examinations. Their needs for learning materials are definitely different. Thus, more targeted teaching materials need to be developed.

At the stage of higher education, there are even greater varieties of learners with different kinds of learning objectives. Some students choose Chinese to complete the required course for foreign languages in university, some choose Chinese as their minor, some as their major. For those who learn Chinese as the compulsory course for foreign languages, teaching materials at language level is enough to meet the learners' need. For those who take Chinese as their minor, teaching materials need to be expanded to at the least the culture level or literature level. Yet for those Chinese major, teaching materials need to be further extended to various perspectives according to students' interest and the educating goals, such as literature, society, business and commerce, tourism, history, philosophy, linguistics, etc. More diversified teaching materials need to be developed to meet the dynamic demands of university students, not only to improve their language competence, but also to cultivate their academic abilities.

Not to mention, at the stage of adult education, learners are often more utility-oriented, with very specific purpose of improving their Chinese proficiency in certain aspect, either for business or academic travel to China, or reading and writing mails at their jobs, or working as a tour guide, etc. Thus, various teaching materials concentrating on specific learning objectives are in demand for either short-term or long-term training to satisfy local learners from all ranks.

Therefore, the development of teaching materials for Chinese language could be further expanded from different aspects to meet the various needs of all kinds of local learners.

2. PROMOTING FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHING PROCESSES

While teachers and learners throughout the world are getting more used to distance learning ever since the outbreak of the worldwide pandemic, and opportunities for in-person engagement with other linguistic and cultural communities may continue to be constrained or

influenced, there remain more avenues than ever online to create effective teaching and learning environment. For those countries, where Chinese language teaching has newly sprung up, boosting the localization to build up the independent continuous teaching system of their own is of the top priority, including the establishment of the curriculum provision, teaching design, implementation and evaluation, continuous teaching provision for learners at different levels, etc. based on the local characteristics. Whereas, for those countries with their own Chinese language teaching system, deepening international cooperation of teachers or scholars between China and target countries on the process of teaching would bring great benefits for promoting further development of international Chinese language teaching.

2.1 Enriching the Contents of Teaching

One fact we can't deny is that no matter what textbooks are being employed in the language class, the speed that a complete set of textbooks is developing from being compiled to being published to being promoted and accepted, till being updated, is behind the speed that the language is evolving with the progress of the society. One way to fill in the gap of the language evolution between the updating of textbook and classroom teaching is to supply constant online complements for language materials through videos or audios based on in-depth international academic cooperations. Relevant international academic cooperations sponsored by either institutes in one side or international organizations for both short term and long term need to be further developed and promoted for international Chinese language learning and teaching. Various videos or audios focused on the current situation or latest development of life, people and society in China could be made by language teachers or related professionals and put online at current foreign language learning websites or new Chinese language learning websites set up via the cooperation programs accordingly. In this way, authentic language materials could be captured, collected, updated and utilized in time in the classroom of international Chinese language teaching as good supplementary teaching materials to guarantee efficient language learning.

Take my personal experiences for example, I've participated in two inter-institutes academic cooperation programs between the university where I'm working and the cooperative peer institute in Russia, making videos about various perspectives in current Chinese society, with each program focusing on certain topic. The topic for 2021 program is about current life in China, divided into 6 subtopic as social life, modern technology, economic development, government service, leisure time and tour in Shandong. And the topic for 2022 program is about current development of Chinese countryside, divided into 6 subtopics as rural industry, rural residents'

livelihood, scientific and technological development of agriculture, eco-friendly development, rural culture, and the beauty of farmhouses. By taking videos about current Chinese society and interviews of people from various ranks and fields, the programs not only show about the latest situations and conditions about Chinese society vividly, but also provide the most authentic and up-to-date Chinese language used in daily life by ordinary Chinese in different areas. As a creative means of international academic cooperation on international Chinese language teaching at the post-pandemic era, all those videos made in the programs were uploaded to a specific website, serving as vivid teaching materials for learners in the peer institute in Russia.

If this kind of cooperations could continue and get promoted worldwide in those countries and areas in need, with stable sponsorship and cooperative institutes, teaching contents for international Chinese language classes could be greatly enriched and supplemented to be diversified in a steady continuity at relatively low cost, contributing to the continuous exploration for new opportunities to extend language learning materials at the time of post-pandemic era.

2.2 Diversifying the Methods of Teaching

With relatively long history of foreign and second language teaching in each country around the world especially since the urgent need for international communication in recent decades, almost every country has come to create its own system of foreign/second language teaching methodology. The day has passed when one method is playing a significant or dominant role internationally in the classroom of foreign/second language teaching in various countries. The performance and effect of different kinds of foreign/second language teaching methods has been practiced and tested in different parts of the world, from translation method to direct method to audiolingual method to situational method to cognitive approach to communicative approach to total physical response approach to task-based language teaching approach (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Renandya 2002).

When stepping into the new millennium, each country has picked up the pace of exploring the most suitable foreign language teaching methods for domestic learners with apparent local characteristics. Based on my personal experiences of teaching in U.S., right now, teaching pedagogics as TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling), cooperative study, experience-based learning (EBL), PCA (Performed Culture in Action) are very popular approaches adopted in Chinese language class in U.S. On the other hand, the most popular teaching pedagogics in foreign language class in China is POA (production-oriented approach). Yet, the chance of international communication and discussion among foreign language teachers about classroom pedagogics are getting rarer, especially since the worldwide outbreak

of the epidemic. Instead, academic activities about foreign language teaching methodology prospers mainly domestically within one country.

Therefore, it is of great necessity that teachers and educators from different countries to communicate with each other about various methods adopted or popular within their own districts and talk about the possibility of mutual exchange, so as to enrich the way of teaching in the local international Chinese language teaching classes both theoretically and practically. Probably, the most time-saving and cost-saving way is to expand the publicity and participation of online international conferences about foreign/second language teaching to attract more involvement of foreign/second language teachers or researchers from around the world to discuss, share and explore. After all, today's foreign/second language classes are more often constructed comprehensively, with the flexible employment of several ways of teaching based on the actual conditions of learners and exact need of learning context.

In addition, encouraging learners to take advantage of diversified online learning platforms internationally could also serve as an effective supplement for in-class Chinese language teaching. Those online learning platforms doesn't need to be confined to those within the learners' homeland. Instead, learners could enjoy more fun and find it more stimulating and interesting choosing to join the social media platforms in the country of the target language according to their own preference. Such activities as reading or posting or commenting about others' posts on Chinese social media platforms as blog, vlog or Tik-Tok in their spare time could not only cultivate learners' awareness of using Chinese language as much as possible in daily life, but also bring learners into the authentic context of the target language so as to help learners to acquire Chinese language through immersion in a comparatively relaxing and fun way. Of course, it is the teachers' responsibilities to induce and guide learners to filtrate, join and get blended into the appropriate Chinese social media platform according to the learners' actual situation to make sure that the learners could really benefit for the improvement of their Chinese language proficiency by getting involved in these social media.

Of course, with the downgrading of the risks of the pandemic and the resumption of international travel, more opportunities on international exchange or visit or study programs are expected to be searched and launched through international cooperations so that more learners could go to China to experience and improve Chinese language they've learned in the native Chinese language context.

2.3 Unifying the Evaluation of Teaching

Right now, each country has its own assessment criteria for international Chinese language teaching. For those

with relatively long time or rich experience of Chinese language teaching, there may be a national standard for Chinese language proficiency, such as the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Proficiency Guidelines in the U.S. (ACTFL, 2012), which provides detailed descriptions of what individuals can do with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context. For each skill, the guidelines identify five major levels of proficiency as Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice, and the major levels Advanced, Intermediate and Novice are subdivided into High, Mid and Low sublevels to describe the continuum of language proficiency from that of the highly articulate, well-educated language users to a level of little or no functional ability. Instead of the description on one specific language, the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines provide general criteria for the teaching of various foreign languages. Yet, for those countries where international Chinese language teaching newly springs up, assessment criteria or rubrics are only set by specific language teachers in specific institutes.

While in China, where Chinese language originates, national assessment criteria and rubrics for international Chinese language teaching are represented by HSK (Chinese language proficiency) tests (Ministry of Education of PRC & National Language Committee, 2021), which are classified into 6 levels in terms of Chinese language listening, reading and writing, ranging in gradually increasing difficulty from level 1 to 6, and 3 levels in terms of Chinese language speaking, ranging from novice to intermediate to advanced. For each level, there are specific and explicit descriptions about vocabulary and communicative competence the learners are expected to acquire about Chinese language.

Diversified assessment criteria might bring inconvenience for both teachers and learners, especially when learners want to use the transcript of relevant Chinese language proficiency tests as a certificate either for pursuit of further study or for international-wide job hunting. Maybe it's time for relevant scholars and teachers from various countries to cooperate together to work out relatively reliable and unified assessment criteria and rubrics for Chinese as a foreign language appropriate and available for learners all over the world, just as the continuum of a series of tests for English language by Cambridge English Assessment serving for various learners ranging in age from children to teenagers to adults and for various learning purposes from business to academics to oversea study, which are widely employed and accepted in most parts of the world, and thus bring about great convenience for both learners and teachers.

3. PROMOTING FURTHER PROGRESS OF TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In face of the ever-changing world of the post-pandemic era, teachers are getting more and more used to various online meetings or workshops for professional development, which could not only save the time and energy of travelling for participants, but also reduce cost and workload of organizing for hosts or sponsors. Different kinds of online academic gatherings about foreign language teaching as seminars, lectures, conference, workshops, salons, etc. are prospering vigorously within each country domestically at present, due to the simple fact that online activities are much less confined to meeting time and venue. Without the inconvenience of travelling and the consideration of selecting conference rooms and accommodation, any workday evening or weekend could be accessible for teachers' professional development, just with an electronic device and internet connection at hand. We've come to an age when self-learning and self-improvement are becoming much more convenient and available than ever before. Whereas, international-wide academic communication about foreign language teaching and teachers' professional development is much lagged behind compared with that of the domestic one within each country, as each country is still groping to adjust and adapt to the most appropriate way for international connection at the post-pandemic time. Certain attention could be shifted onto further exploration about possibilities for international academic cooperation, especially when it comes to international Chinese language teachers' professional development.

3.1 Expanding the Scope of Teachers' Professional Development

On the one hand, for those countries where international Chinese language teaching has newly developed, the establishment of the independent local teachers training programs is of great importance, either degree program or profession program, so as to set up the teams of local Chinese language teachers of their own as soon as possible to provide classes for learners with different needs.

On the other hand, for those countries where independent teaching systems for Chinese language has long been built with strong and supportive groups of local Chinese language teachers, further promotion of world-wide teachers' retraining, professional development and academic exchange about international Chinese language teaching is of special necessity, especially given the current accessibility of online distance meeting. It is not only probable but also practical to expand academic communications among foreign language teachers about teaching approaches, class organizations, classroom

management, teachers' and learners' assessment, etc. from national level to international level. Such kind of expansion for teachers' retraining or professional development could not only help teachers get to know about the latest international trend of foreign language teaching, but also encourage teachers to innovate and improve their own teaching on the basis of the enlightenment and reflection they've benefited from the exchange of ideas within the international scope so as to learn from each other and boost the synchronous originality and innovation for international Chinese language teaching throughout the whole world.

In addition, teachers' professional development on Chinese language could no longer satisfy the need of learning and teaching in some parts of the world, and the demand for further expansion from Chinese language to various aspects that language connotes is increasing. Therefore, in those districts where it is needed, teachers' retraining or professional development could be further expanded to such areas as Chinese culture, Chinese society, Chinese literature, Chinese history, Chinese philosophy, etc. so as to keep pace with the increasingly demand of learners and offer diversified classes and programs for learners accordingly.

3.2 Enhancing the Inter-Institute Teachers' Exchange

Various world-wide inter-institute cooperations could be dated way back to a few decades ago with globalization. With decades of development, a great number of universities and academic institutes in China have set up cooperative relationship with brother or sister institutions of higher education overseas in various countries of the world. International academic visits and collaborative programs are so common that the major of international Chinese language teaching for undergraduates started to be offered in universities in China since 1980s and soon blossomed in most universities all over China. Yet, ever since the outbreak of the pandemic, most of the cooperative programs have to come to stop or suspend due to the difficulty in international travel out of the concern for world-wide health safety.

With the gradual internationally reopening, it's time not only to resume the inter-institute exchange programs for teachers, but also to further enhance international cooperative programs for teachers' exchange, especially for foreign language teachers. With foreign language teachers going to the countries of the target language they are teaching in China and foreign Chinese language teachers going to China, they can not only get themselves more familiar with the language and culture by immersing experience in the most authentic social context, but also contribute to the foreign language teaching in the target country with their own native language. From this point of view, such kind of foreign language teachers exchange programs is indeed a win-win cooperation.

What's more, inter-institute teachers' exchange programs at the post-pandemic era could be diversified, with either short-term or long-term cooperation. Short-term language teachers exchange programs could be designed for winter or summer break, while long-term programs could be planned during sabbaticals. Moreover, frequent distance exchange online could also be of much possibility to encourage international academic exchange among language teachers. Further enhancement of teachers' exchange programs could also be extended to teachers and fields other than Chinese language, such as Chinese culture and society, Chinese literature, Chinese philosophy, Chinese history, etc.

In conclusion, while we have to admit various aspects about our life and way of thinking has been greatly influenced and even changed by the outbreak and spread of the world-wide pandemic, great number of possibilities and probabilities are waiting ahead for us to be explored in the post-pandemic time. When it comes to international Chinese language teaching, more opportunities for further development and innovation could be searched from the perspectives of teaching materials, teaching processes and teachers' professional development based on further strengthening of win-win cooperative collaborations among relevant institutions between China and the target countries where Chinese language is taught.

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