

Research on Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL)

Yang (Frank) Gong

Faculty of Education, University of Macau

Abstract

This article reports the development of, and major issues in, current CFL teaching research, including: 1) the pedagogy of CFL teaching, 2) CFL spoken language and literacy skills, 3) CFL teacher education and development, and 4) policy and planning of CFL teaching. The research documents the efforts that CFL scholars have made to meet the explosive growth in demand for Chinese teaching and learning worldwide. Research on CFL teaching is still beset by a number of challenges, and the article concludes with some suggestions for scholars to promote high-quality empirical studies in support of the global development of CFL education.

Keywords: Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL); Teaching pedagogy; Language and literacy skills; Teacher education and development; Language policy and planning

1 Introduction

Over the last couple of decades Chinese has been increasingly taught and learnt as an important foreign language both within and outside China (Gong, Gao, & Lyu 2020; Jiang & Cohen 2012; Ma, Gong, Gao, & Xiang 2017; Modern Language Association 2021). Commensurate with this considerable growth in learners of the language, an increasing body of studies have yielded important insights into critical issues in relation to the cognitive and sociocultural aspects of Chinese language learning (e.g., Gong, Guo, Li, Lai, & Wang 2021; Liu, 2014), Chinese language teaching pedagogy (e.g., Qi & Lai 2017; Shao 2013), language policy and planning (e.g., Chen 2013; Gong, Gao, Li, & Xue 2021; Loh, Tam, & Lau 2019), language testing (e.g., Li & Li 2014; Lin, Lam, & Tse 2019), and Chinese language teacher education and professional development (e.g., Ke, Lu, & Pan 2015;

Yang, 2019). Research findings on the acquisition of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) have contributed to theoretical discussions on second/foreign language (SL/FL) acquisition by verifying, challenging, or proposing modifications to existing SL/FL theories and models (Gong et al., 2020).

Intensive research on critical issues related to the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) has been supporting the growth of CFL teaching and learning worldwide. Since Chinese is a language with significant typological distance from Western languages, research in teaching CFL can contribute significantly to SL/FL theory construction and testing (Han, 2017). This article aims to consolidate the knowledge foundation for CFL teaching by identifying topical issues that researchers in and outside China are concerned with in their studies on CFL teaching.

2 The worldwide development of teaching Chinese as a foreign language

The Chinese language family has the largest number of speakers in the world, either as a lingua franca, a heritage language, or a first or additional language in Chinese-speaking and non-Chinese-speaking regions. It has more than one billion native speakers (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig 2015), and there are tens of millions of learners of Chinese all over the world (Duff & Li 2013). The Chinese language family has a number of related varieties, which are conventionally classified into seven dialect groups, namely Mandarin/Northern (北方方言), Wu (吳方言), Gan (贛方言), Xiang (湘方言), Min (閩方言), Hakka (客家方言), and Yue (粵方言) (Huang & Liao 2002; 中國政府網, 2013). The Mandarin Chinese group is the largest with around 900 million native speakers (Lewis et al., 2015), and it carries the most international currency. Different terms have been used to refer to Mandarin Chinese, including *Putonghua* or Modern Standard Chinese (普通話, ‘the common language’ or lingua franca, politicised terms used by the government on the Chinese mainland), *Guoyu* (國語, ‘national language’, used in Chinese Taiwan), or *Huayu* (華語, a term used in Singapore that highlights Chinese heritage).

Acoustically Chinese is a tonal language, and Putonghua Chinese has four main tones. Putonghua Chinese is written using Chinese characters (漢字), commonly regarded as a logographic writing system since the written symbols (characters) represent lexical morphemes rather than individual phonemes (Perfetti & Dunlap, 2008). Chinese characters can be divided into integral characters and compound characters based on their physical structure, with strokes serving as basic components. Linguistically, Chinese characters, words, and vocabulary represent different concepts separately, and thus character identification, word segmentation, and lexical access are three separate and fundamental skills that learners of Chinese must develop, especially when they are learning to read and write (Shen & Jiang, 2013). Syntactic relations in modern and spoken Chinese are represented by means of word order and functional words. Moreover, *Hanyu Pinyin* (漢語拼音) may be adopted to spell out Chinese characters in syllables, with complete syllables comprised of initials, finals, and tone marks. Thus, CFL teachers and researchers need to make strenuous efforts to facilitate learners’ acquisition of Chinese characters, vocabulary, and grammar, as well their appropriate and effective use of Chinese (i.e., their intercultural communicative competence).

The teaching and learning of CFL has a long history, but this article focuses on CFL teaching since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China. In the 1950s, CFL teaching mostly served China’s foreign diplomacy, playing an important role in helping the country to

build international relations with other Socialist countries and the Third World (Zhao & Huang, 2010). Figures from 2004 suggested that more than 30 million learners were learning Chinese as an additional language through various kinds of learning around the globe (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2005).

To facilitate this explosion in foreign demand, the first Confucius Institute was launched in South Korea (Ping 2009), and by the end of 2019 over 30,000 primary and secondary schools outside China offered Chinese language courses, while more than 4,000 institutions of higher education had established Chinese programs (Ning 2022). This rapid development of CFL teaching and learning has been closely associated with intensified government investment, and facilitated by intensive research activities covering the major issues concerning educational stakeholders in the teaching of CFL worldwide.

3 Research on teaching Chinese as a foreign language

According to Zhao and Huang (2010), the first academic article to deal with aspects of CFL teaching was '*Some Issues in Teaching Chinese to Non-Chinese Students*' (Zhou 1953), which was published in the journal *Chinese Language* in China. Since the reform and opening up of China in the late 1970s, however, the number of studies on CFL education has steadily increased. This growth has been particularly noteworthy in the last fifteen years, not only in terms of a substantial increase in the number of publications including dissertations, journal articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings, but also with regard to emerging perspectives on, and broad thematic areas in, CFL research.

Against this backdrop, concerted and collective efforts across CFL research communities are needed in order to advance our understanding of how CFL teaching and learning develops and how this development can be supported by relevant research. At the same time, better knowledge of research on CFL teaching and learning among researchers in wider fields could help to realise its much-anticipated potential contribution to SL/FL theory construction and testing. To achieve these goals, there is a pressing need for the field to reflect on what has been achieved and what still needs to be done in future research on the teaching and learning of CFL. Scholars have recognised that current studies on CFL teaching mainly focus on four themes: 1) the pedagogy of CFL teaching, 2) CFL spoken language and literacy skills, 3) CFL teacher education and development, and 4) policy and planning of CFL teaching (e.g., Gong et al. 2020; Ma et al. 2018).

3.1 The pedagogy of CFL teaching

Research on the pedagogy of CFL teaching is mainly related to how Chinese language teachers incorporate new concepts, theories, and pedagogical approaches to facilitate learners' acquisition and promote their proficiency in the language (Ma et al. 2018). Existing empirical studies on this research topic demonstrate that scholars have mainly concentrated on developing tailor-made curriculum designs, using different teaching materials, and investigating ways of assessing international students' Chinese learning achievement, with regard to oral proficiency, knowledge of Chinese characters, and HSK scores (an international standardised test of CFL learners' ability).

Also, most studies have been conducted in tertiary settings where Chinese language teachers try to develop tailor-made approaches and programs to enhance the quality of Chinese teaching in response to an increasingly diverse student population with varying

Chinese proficiency levels. Moreover, because Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been used as an important pedagogical resource in language education for decades, pedagogical initiatives at the Chinese course level are to some extent driven by ICT integration and educational perspectives. Studies have shown that CFL teachers have attempted to integrate new strategies (e.g., input enhancement and input modality; see Hong & Zhang 2017) and innovative technologies (e.g., social networking sites; see Lyu & Lai 2022) into their teaching.

3.2 CFL spoken language and literacy skills

Apart from efforts to develop appropriate curricula, pedagogical practices, and materials, researchers have been very concerned with how CFL learners learn and use the language. The learning and use of Chinese has been often considered a challenging task for students from both Western countries and Confucian heritage countries (e.g., Japan, Korea, and Vietnam), since ‘Chinese is fundamentally different from alphabetic languages in terms of phonology, orthography and morphology’ (Shen & Xu 2015: 82). Overall, empirical studies on this research issue usually relate to CFL learners’ use of Chinese characters, their phonetic, lexical, and grammatical development, learner factors, and learning beliefs and strategies.

There are a number of characteristics of this body of research. First, the majority of current studies continue to focus on traditional problem areas for Chinese language learners, such as phonetics and phonology, Chinese characters, lexical acquisition and grammatical development, along with other areas such as the development of language skills and pragmatic competence. Second, the recognition of language learners as individuals, with various capacities and aptitudes, promotes Chinese scholars to look inward to the effects of motivation and learning ability, and externally to the effects of students’ backgrounds on their learning progress and communication performance in actual scenarios. In particular, most of the studies portray CFL learners’ learning and use as a linear and unidirectional process towards native-like performance. Finally, Chinese researchers are particularly interested in importing and adopting theories and concepts generated in other research contexts, such as the teaching of English as a SL/FL; a few studies have confirmed and even supplemented these theories and concepts. Moreover, they tend to adopt particular methodological approaches, such as corpus analysis, when investigating the learning processes and developmental features of CFL learners (Ma et al., 2018).

3.3 CFL teacher education and development

Since language teachers play a critical role in implementing relevant language curricula and enhancing CFL learners’ learning effectiveness, their education and professional development has been a priority issue in research (Lai, Li, & Gong 2019). As the numbers of Chinese language learners are increasing rapidly every year, more and more Chinese language teachers are urgently needed in and outside China (Modern Language Association 2021; Wang, Moloney, & Li 2013). Existing studies exploring teacher education programs for Chinese language teachers call for the development and sustaining of high-quality pre-service teacher education programs, providing more practical, tailor-made, and pedagogically informative content for course participants (Gong, Lai, & Gao 2021).

Compared to research on pre-service teachers, there are many more studies examining in-service teacher development with foci on the influence of teachers' knowledge and beliefs about the pedagogical process, job burnout among Chinese teachers, and teachers' professional skills and competence. Moreover, CFL researchers are also interested in comparing pre-service and in-service teachers' teaching plans and instructional practices, in order to provide more constructive guidelines and practical resources for pre-service teacher education programs. Since teaching and learning of CFL have transcended national boundaries, teaching Chinese has become a profession worldwide and more and more Western English-speaking universities are providing CFL teacher education or training programs. In this regard, there is a pressing need to compare goals and designs of these programs and incorporate perspectives of teacher educators, teacher trainers, and students involved in CFL teacher education or training programs in different educational contexts.

3.4 Policy and planning of CFL teaching

CFL teaching has also been examined at the policy level. It has been often assumed that policy makers, academic researchers, and teachers share the same goal of enhancing CFL students' language learning experiences and quality (Gong, Gao, Xie & Li 2021). Studies on this research topic mostly report on the status quo of CFL teaching and learning in Asian countries such as Singapore, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. They also document efforts to promote the teaching and learning of CFL in Western and Southern African countries including France, Germany, the USA, Canada, Australia, Brazil, and Columbia. These reports show that Northeast Asia (including Korea and Japan) has become one of the most active regions in CFL teaching and learning, largely because of sociocultural exchanges and the region's geographical proximity to China.

However, because of China's ascent as the second largest world economy and its increasing global power, North America, Europe, Australia, and Africa are also emerging areas of CFL education. Confucius Institutes are generally seen as a strategic move to promote Chinese language and culture, and researchers have examined their important role in enhancing language planning and cultural diplomacy from the perspectives of policymakers of China and other countries (Liu 2019; Wheeler 2013).

4 Conclusion

With the aim of identifying the development of, and major issues in, current CFL teaching research, this article documents the notable efforts that have been made by our colleagues in the TCFL community. The majority of the existing research on CFL education has been conducted by Chinese scholars and published in Chinese journals. At the same time, international scholars and English-language publications have also devoted a great deal of energy to responding to the increasing global demand for the acquisition of Chinese, especially in Western countries. Scholars in and outside China have been found to have diverse research foci on issues concerning CFL teaching. Specifically, studies published in Chinese journals are often concerned with instructional practices and teacher education and development, whereas studies published in international journals in English usually concentrate on student learning outcomes and pedagogical approaches to facilitate learners' language skill development, and on learners' intercultural communicative competence and Chinese language learning in cross-/intercultural encounters. We draw on these findings to

offer the following suggestions to scholars, so they can optimise various resources to reinforce research on CFL education both in and outside China.

First, more effort should be made to bridge CFL research inside and outside China, since CFL teaching contexts (e.g., Confucius Institutes, study-abroad programs) are often associated with both an educational institution in China and an overseas educational institution. In such contexts, institutions could provide more financial resources and offer opportunities to build a platform for international cooperation and to support cross-border projects. At the same time, institutions need to recruit more talent with bilingual or multilingual competence, especially in Chinese and English. Second, researchers in and outside China should be encouraged to co-organise academic dialogues on CFL teaching in order to build international links and create cross-border collaboration opportunities. These can help to disseminate and address research issues of common concern in CFL teaching. Third, although Chinese scholars have followed international trends and drawn on many theories and concepts generated by their Western counterparts, their own original theoretical contributions to SL/FL education are relatively limited and peripheral. This unbalanced situation should be adjusted or changed, and the CFL research community as a whole should be encouraged to examine a broader range of non-Chinese learners both in and outside China, who are learning and using Chinese in diverse contexts. Such an expansion will help researchers to conduct studies that are not only responsive to local needs and interests, but also informed by research on other languages. Last but not least, both Chinese and international journals need to prioritise the publication of cross-border studies, because teamwork projects generally benefit research on crucial aspects of CFL teaching. Journals should continue to publish more evidence-based quantitative and qualitative studies, in order to maximise the impact of Chinese scholarship and optimise CFL teaching research.

References and further reading

- Chen, P. (2013) 政治、經濟、社會與海外漢語教學:以澳大利亞為例 [‘Political, economical and ethnographical perspectives on teaching Chinese as a second language’]. *世界漢語教學 [Chinese Teaching in the World]* 3: 400–412.
- Duff, P., & Li, D. D. (2013) ‘Learning Chinese as a heritage language’, in K. Arnett & C. Mady (Eds), *Minority populations in Canadian second language education*, Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, pp. 87–100.
- Gong, Y., Gao, X. S., & Lyu, B. (2020) ‘Teaching Chinese as a second or foreign language to non-Chinese learners in mainland China (2014–2018)’, *Language Teaching* 53 (1): 44–62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444819000387>.
- Gong, Y., Gao, X., Li, C. & Xue, L. (2021) ‘Language practice in the multilingual workplace: A Confucius Institute in Macau’, *Círculo de Lingüística Aplicada a la Comunicación* 86: 43–54. <https://doi.org/10.5209/clac.75494>.
- Gong, Y., Guo, Q., Li, M., Lai, C., & Wang, C. (2021) ‘Developing literacy or focusing on interaction: New Zealand students’ strategic efforts related to Chinese language learning during study abroad in China’, *System* 98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102462>.
- Gong, Y., Lai, C., & Gao, X. (2021) ‘Language teachers’ identity in teaching intercultural communicative competence’, *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2021.1954938>.
- Han, J. H. (2017) *Post-lingual Chinese language learning: ‘Hanzi’ pedagogy*, London, UK: Springer.
- Hong, W. & Zhang, J. (2017) 輸入強化與輸入模態對漢語二語句法學習的影響——以兩類‘把’字結構的學習為例 [‘The effect of input enhancement and input modality on Chinese L2 syntactic learning: A case study of learning two types of ‘ba’ construction’]. *語言文字應用 [Applied Linguistics]*, 2: 83–92.
- Huang, B. R., & Liao, X. D. (Eds) (2002) 現代漢語 (第三版) [*Modern Chinese* (3rd ed.)]. 北京, 中國: 高等教育出版社 [Beijing, China: Higher Education Press].

- Jiang, X., & Cohen, A. D. (2012) 'A critical review of research on strategies in learning Chinese as both a second and foreign language', *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* 2 (1): 9–43. <https://doi.org/10.14746/sslt.2012.2.1.2>.
- Ke, C. R., Lu, Y., & Pan, X. F. (2015) 漢語教師教學技能及二語習得理論知識的評估模式 [‘Assessing international Chinese language teachers’ second language acquisition theoretical foundation and language pedagogy’]. *世界漢語教學 [Chinese Teaching in the World]*, 1: 111–129.
- Lai, C., Li, Z., & Gong, Y. (2019) 'Boundary brokering for cross-cultural professional learning in international school contexts', *British Educational Research Journal* 45 (6): 1105–1123. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3553>.
- Lewis, M. P., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (Eds) (2015) *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (18th ed.), Dallas, TX: SIL International.
- Li, X. Q., & Li, J. H. (2014) 漢語口語考試(SCT)的效度分析 [‘Validity analysis of Spoken Chinese Test’]. *世界漢語教學 [Chinese Teaching in the World]*, 1: 103–112.
- Lin, L., Lam, J. W. I., & Tse, S. K. (2019) 'Test takers' strategy use and L2 Chinese reading test performance in mainland China: A structural equation approach', *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 60: 189–198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2019.01.002>.
- Liu, X. (2019) 'So similar, so different, so Chinese: Analytical comparisons of the Confucius Institute with its Western Counterparts', *Asian Studies Review* 43 (2): 256–275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1584602>.
- Liu, Y. (2014) 漢語學習者陳述句語調音高的聲學實驗分析 [‘Acoustic analysis of Chinese declarative sentences produced by learners’]. *漢語學習 [Chinese Language Learning]*, 1: 91–99.
- Loh, E. K., Tam, L. C., & Lau, K. C. (2019) 'Moving between language frontiers: The challenges of the medium of instruction policy for Chinese as a second language', *Language Policy* 18 (1): 131–153. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-018-9465-7>.
- Lyu, B. & Lai, C. (2022) 'Analysing learner engagement with native speaker feedback on an educational social networking site: An ecological perspective', *Computer Assisted Language Learning*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2022.2030364>.
- Ma, X. L., Gong, Y., Gao, X. S., & Xiang, Y. Q. (2017) 'The teaching of Chinese as a second or foreign language: A systematic review of the literature 2005–2015', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 38 (9): 815–830. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2016.1268146>.
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2005) 孔子學院的數目可以達到100所 [‘The number of Confucius Institutes around the world to be one hundred’]. http://old.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_1017/200507/10592.html.
- Modern Language Association. (2021) 'Reports on the MLA job list'. <https://www.mla.org/Resources/Career/Job-List/Reports-on-the-MLA-Job-List>.
- Ning, J. M. (Ed.) (2022) 國際中文教育研究報告 (2020) [The Research Report of International Chinese Education (2020)]. 北京:商務印書館 [Beijing: The Commercial Press].
- Perfetti, C. A., & Dunlap, S. (2008) 'Learning to read: General principles and writing system variations', in K. Koda & A. M. Zehler (Eds), *Learning to read across languages: Cross-linguistic relationships in first- and second-language literacy*, New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 25–50.
- Ping, F. (2009, 2 September) 漢語國際推廣簡史:從對外漢語教學到孔子學院 [‘A brief history of the international promotion of Chinese: From teaching Chinese to foreigners to the Confucian Institute’]. *中華讀書報 [China Reading Weekly]*.
- Qi, X. D. & Lai, C. (2017) 'The effects of deductive instruction and inductive instruction on learners' development of pragmatic competence in the teaching of Chinese as a second language', *System* 70: 26–37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.08.011>.
- Shao, J. (2013) 認知功能教學法'人稱回指教學實驗 [‘Teaching Chinese personal anaphora to second language learners’]. *世界漢語教學 [Chinese Teaching in the World]*, 4: 537–547.
- Shen, H. H. & Jiang, X. (2013) 'Character reading fluency, word segmentation accuracy, and reading comprehension in L2 Chinese', *Reading in a Foreign Language* 25 (1): 1–15.
- Shen, H. H. & Xu, W. (2015) 'Active learning: Qualitative inquiries into vocabulary instruction in Chinese L2 classrooms', *Foreign Language Annals* 48 (1): 82–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12137>.
- Wang, D., Moloney, R., & Li, Z. (2013) 'Towards Internationalising the Curriculum: A Case Study of Chinese Language Teacher Education Programs in China and Australia', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 38 (9): 116–135. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/aeipt.204137>.

- Wheeler, A. (2014) 'Cultural diplomacy, language planning, and the case of the University of Nairobi Confucius Institute', *Journal of Asian and African studies* 49 (1): 49–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909613477834>.
- Yang, J. (2019) 'Understanding Chinese language teachers' beliefs about themselves and their students in an English context', *System* 80: 73–82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.10.014>.
- Zhao, H. & Huang, J. (2010) 'China's policy of Chinese as a foreign language and the use of overseas Confucius Institutes', *Educational Research for Policy and Practice* 9 (2): 127–142. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-009-9078-1>.
- Zhou, Z. M. (1953) 教非漢族學生學習漢語的一些問題 ['Some issues in teaching Chinese to non-Chinese students']. 中國語文 [*Chinese Language*], 7.