SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORIAL

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The Teaching and Learning of Chinese as a Second or Foreign Language: The Current Situation and Future Directions

Abstract   In this opening commentary, we highlight the development of the teaching and learning of Chinese as a second or foreign language (CSL/CFL), which has attracted much attention from researchers, language educators, and other stakeholders worldwide. To contribute to this ongoing examination and discussion, this special issue documents the collective efforts of scholars in different educational contexts to review six critical issues in teaching and learning CSL/CFL: learning and instruction of reading Chinese as an additional language, Chinese character teaching and learning, learner identity in CSL/CFL education, teaching and learning Chinese through immersion, technology assisted CSL/CFL teaching and learning, and mobile assisted learning CFL. We contend that all efforts to address these critical issues require constant examination to facilitate further development in CSL/CFL education around the world.

Keywords   teaching and learning, Chinese as a second or foreign language (CSL/CFL), review, future directions, research agenda

Introduction

In the last couple of decades, Chinese has been increasingly taught and learnt as

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an important second or foreign language both within and outside China. Commensurate with this considerable growth in learners of the language, studies have yielded important insights into critical issues in relation to the cognitive and sociocultural aspects of Chinese language learning (e.g., Fan & Li, 2018; Liu, 2014; Qi & Lai, 2017; Zhang & Roberts, 2019), Chinese language teaching pedagogy (e.g., Curdt-Christiansen, 2008; Shao, 2013; Zhao, 2016), language policy and planning (e.g., Chen, 2013; Loh, Tam, & Lau, 2019; Lu et al., 2017), language testing (e.g., Ke, 2006; Li & Li, 2014), and Chinese language teacher education and professional development (e.g., Gong, Hu, & Lai, 2018; Ke, Lu, & Pan, 2015; Lai, Li, & Gong, 2019; Wang & Bale, 2019; Yang, 2019). Research findings on the acquisition of Chinese as a second or foreign language (CSL/CFL) have contributed to the theoretical discussions on second language (L2) acquisition by verifying, challenging or proposing modifications to existing L2 theories and models (J. H. Han, 2017; Zhao, 2011). Research findings on CSL/CFL teachers have enriched the teacher education discourse and identified unique challenges posed by Confucian ideologies of teaching and learning.

Since Chinese is a language with typological distance from Western languages, research into Chinese learning can contribute significantly to L2 theory construction and testing (J. H. Han, 2017). This special issue intends to consolidate the knowledge foundation for CSL/CFL teaching by curating a collection of review papers on various aspects of CSL/CFL teaching and learning. It brings together the efforts of scholars from the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong SAR, Macau SAR, the US, New Zealand, and Australia to review the status quo and explore future directions in the field of CSL/CFL education. These review studies present issues that have been investigated, understanding that has been achieved, problems to be addressed, and efforts needed in future research. By presenting this collection of review papers, this special issue aims to foster an academic dialogue among scholars who hold different perspectives concerning the development of and research on teaching and learning CSL/CFL worldwide.

The Development of Teaching and Learning Chinese as a Second or Foreign Language Worldwide

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 tens of millions of learners of Chinese all over the world (Duff & Li, 2013). The Chinese family has a number of related language varieties, which are conventionally classified into seven dialect groups (Mandarin/Northern, Wu, Gan, Xiang, Min, Hakka, and Yue; see Huang & Liao, 2002). The Mandarin Chinese group is the largest group, with around 900 million native speakers (Lewis et al., 2015), and carries the most international currency. Different terms have been used to refer to Mandarin Chinese, including *Putonghua* or Modern Standard Chinese (普通话, "the common language" or lingua franca politicized by the government in the Chinese mainland), *Guoyu* (国语, "national language" used in Chinese Taiwan) or *Huayu* (华语, the term that highlights Chinese heritage used in Singapore). In this special issue, Chinese refers to Mandarin Chinese. Chinese is a tonal language acoustically, and *Putonghua* Chinese has four main tones. *Hanyu Pinyin* (汉语拼音) is adopted to spell out Chinese characters in syllables, with complete syllables comprised of initials, finals, and tone marks. *Putonghua* Chinese is written using Chinese characters (汉字 *hanzi*), commonly regarded as a logographic writing system since its 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 fundamental skills for learners of Chinese to develop, especially when they learn to read and write (Shen & Jiang, 2013). Moreover, syntactic relations in modern and spoken Chinese are represented by means of word order and functional words. Consequently, CSL/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 (intercultural communicative competence).

The learning and teaching of CSL/CFL has a long history but this special issue focuses on CSL/CFL teaching since the foundation of the People's Republic of China. In the 1950s, CSL/CFL teaching mainly served China's foreign diplomacy and played an important role in helping the country to build up

international relations with socialist countries and the third world (Zhao & Huang, 2010). Up to 2004, more than 30 million learners were reportedly learning the Chinese language as a CSL/CFL through various kinds of learning around the globe (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2005) and the first Confucius Institute was launched in South Korea (Ping, 2009). By December 2018, 548 Confucius Institutes and 1,193 Confucius Classrooms had been founded to teach Chinese to more than 1.8 million students in 154 countries/regions around the world (Hanban, 2018, p. 10). Such a rapid development of CSL/CFL teaching and learning has been closely associated with intensified government investment and supported by intensive research activities covering major issues concerning educational stakeholders in the teaching of Chinese as a second or foreign language (TCSL/TCFL) worldwide.

The Research on Teaching and Learning Chinese as a Second or Foreign Language

According to Zhao and Huang (2010), the first academic article regarding teaching CSL/CFL is "Some issues in teaching Chinese to non-Chinese students" (Zhou, 1953), which was published in the *Chinese Language* in China. Since the reform and opening up of China in the late 1970s, the number of studies on CSL/CFL education has steadily increased (Gao, Liao, & Li, 2014; Gong, Lyu, & Gao, 2018; Jiang & Cohen, 2012; Zhao, 2011). Especially in the last 15 years, this growth has been particularly noteworthy, 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, CSL/CFL research. The majority of the research on CSL/CFL education has been conducted by Chinese scholars and published in Chinese journals. At the same time, international scholars and English publications have also made notable efforts to respond to the increasing demand for Chinese language teaching and learning across the world, especially in Western countries (Gong et al., 2018). Scholars in and outside China are found to exhibit distinctly different research foci on issues related to CSL/CFL teaching and learning (Gong et al., 2018; Gong, Gao, & Lyu, 2020; Jiang & Cohen, 2012). 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 students' language skill development, and on students' intercultural competence and Chinese language learning in cross/intercultural encounters. The research on CSL/CFL teaching and learning inside and outside the Chinese mainland seems to be "two worlds apart" (Gong et al., 2018, p. 278). Although China and Chinese scholars have already become the major producers of CSL/CFL education research, the impact of their research on international Chinese language education, pedagogical development, and international language education research "remains limited and peripheral" (Gong et al., 2020, p. 44). Z. H. Han (2017) argued that existing CSL/CFL research is "mostly disparate and narrow, driven more by the researchers' idiosyncratic interests than by a desire to engage big questions in the field" (p. 21).

Thus, concerted and collective efforts across CSL/CFL research communities are needed in order to advance our understanding of how CSL/CFL education develops and how this development can be supported by relevant research. Rallying researchers to "investigate, collectively, those phenomena that have garnered theoretical attention" (Z. H. Han, 2017, p. 21) in second language acquisition could help realize the much-argued potential of CSL/CFL research for L2 theory construction and testing (Zhao, 2011). To achieve this ultimate goal, it is pressing for the field to reflect on what has been achieved and what needs to be done in future research on the teaching and learning of CSL/CFL. For this reason, this special issue invites scholars to review the existing literature on a range of topics in both cognitive and sociocultural aspects of CSL/CFL learning, including CSL/CFL reading, CSL/CFL education in immersion contexts, Chinese character teaching and learning, computer assisted CSL/CFL teaching and learning, and CSL/CFL learner identity. It should be noted that researchers' sociopolitical stances and the educational contexts in which they are situated might have influenced their observations and interpretations of CSL/CFL issues. However, we believe that such dialogic exchanges can help readers better understand the diversity and complexity of the relevant topics. By inviting critical review papers on varied topics in different contexts, we expect this special issue to give some insight into the status, challenges, opportunities, and future directions of CSL/CFL education across the world, and serve as a starting point for ongoing academic discussions on various aspects of CSL/CFL research.

Introducing the Special Issue

In the lead article of this special issue, Sihui Ke (2020) offers a critical examination of the research on CSL/CFL reading instruction. Combing through 92 empirical studies on Chinese L2 reading published in international journals in English from 1976 to 2018, Ke reports that this research field has received substantial attention in the past decade. Studies in this field have focused on learning to read Chinese characters with the help of technology rather than reading assessment, individual learner differences, student learning context, writing to learn Chinese characters and reading to learn vocabulary. The author identified some limitations in this research field, including the limitations of the research foci (i.e., focusing primarily on Chinese characters) and the limitation of research context (i.e., American university first-year students). Ke concludes that future research studies may expand research attention to word-level reading and broaden research contexts. She further calls for the coordinated effort of researchers from different educational contexts to conduct cross-border investigations with diverse CSL/CFL learners.

By analyzing the largest Chinese journal full-text database, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), and one of the most influential English journal databases, Web of Science (WoS), Michael Li (2020) reviews 142 Chinese language articles and 72 English language articles on Chinese character teaching and learning published between 2005 and 2019. The paper identifies four common research themes, including pedagogy and teaching strategies, recognition and writing study, Chinese character knowledge and awareness, and computer-assisted character learning. In particular, the issue of character pedagogy and teaching strategies is a central topic in China, while computer-assisted character learning, by contrast, is the most researched theme by scholars outside China. Li further points out that the majority of publications in China are non-empirical studies, whereas most studies outside China are empirical with quantitative design (in a positivist paradigm). Non-empirical studies usually stay at the level of opinion, a summary of personal experience, speculation or pure theoretical discussion and quantitative research is mainly used to examine the relationship between variables. Li's findings suggest a pressing need to further investigate Chinese character education for international students by using a more balanced and in-depth integration of positivist and

interpretivist paradigms (Gao, Li, & Lü, 2001; Ma, Gong, Gao, & Xiang, 2017).

In the next article, Citing Li and Wendong Li (2020) draw on a sociocultural theoretical perspective (Johnson, 2006) for second language education to review current studies on learner identity in CSL/CFL education. By performing keyword frequency analysis with 33 Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) journal articles published during 2005–2019 from WoS, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and EBSCO, they find that the current reviewed studies mostly center on four key thematic topics: (1) Chinese as a heritage learner identity, (2) identity in cross/intercultural communication, (3) identity in the process of language socialization, and (4) identity in digital space. Capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1991), identity and investment model (Norton, 1995) and language socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) are the main constructs that researchers have adopted to examine CSL/CFL learners' identity. Other theoretical perspectives/frameworks such as intercultural identity (Kim, 2008), self-categorization (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) and discourse identity (Gee, 2000) are also used given their theoretical value and interpretive power. In practice, they suggest adopting interdisciplinary perspectives/frameworks to examine the complex nature of learner identity. Their findings have important implications for researchers who are interested in further examining the complexity of learner identity in CSL/CFL education and teachers who are involved in teaching CSL/CFL for international learners with different backgrounds. This future research needs to not only fit in local contexts and address local needs, but also contribute to the research domain of identity and language education in general. With respect to actual Chinese language teaching, Li and Li encourage teachers to raise their awareness of learner identity and keep an open and flexible attitude towards different learner groups' needs.

Chan Lü (2020) reviews research studies on literacy development in K-12 (Kindergarten to Grade 12) Chinese immersion programs in North America, the US in particular. The study includes 35 studies published in both Chinese and English peer-reviewed journals and books. By analyzing the keywords of publications and reading the publications, Lü identifies six main emerging themes in this field: (1) student academic achievement in English, (2) student language performance in Chinese, (3) student literacy acquisition in Chinese, (4) instructional strategies and classroom interaction, (5) learners' affective factors, and (6) student language use. She further points out that this research field

normally uses quantitative methods and cross-sectional design to compare different programs or different groups of students. Lü argues that future studies on Chinese immersion education need to pay more attention to bilingual and literacy learning, content-based instruction in Chinese, and different types of learners. She further advocates adopting a sociocultural approach to examining Chinese immersion programs as social activities situated in their specific contexts, using qualitative methods such as classroom observations, interviews and participant reflections.

Boning Lyu and Xuedan Qi (2020) focuses on the research literature regarding the use of technology in CSL/CFL education. By searching the database of the Web of Science Core Collection, they systematically review 33 relevant empirical studies published outside China from 2008 to 2018. Their review reveals that the field of technology-assisted CSL/CFL teaching and learning covers a wide range of research topics, including teacher education and training in technology integration, student perceptions of technology use, and the effectiveness of technology in Chinese language learning (e.g., linguistic elements and skills). Mobile apps are the most commonly used technology in this field, followed by Web 2.0 technologies (e.g., blogs, wikis, webpages, reading platforms), web conferencing technologies, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), virtual reality (e.g., Second Life), and interactive whiteboards. This body of literature primarily focuses on documenting the benefits and challenges. The benefits include improved motivation, better language performance and enhanced personalized learning. The challenges include technical problems, student retention and a gap between student in- and out-of-class learning. Lyu and Qi suggest future research to address issues related to student ICT literacy development, the use of technology for immersive Chinese language experience, and self-directed learning.

Wenying Zhou (2020) focuses specifically on reviewing mobile assisted Chinese learning as a foreign language. Zhou adopts both keyword and reference searches to critically review studies on the use of mobile learning in CFL published between 2007 and 2019 on Scopus and WoS. The review of 26 empirical studies from international English journals reveals a rapid increase in empirical studies on mobile CFL learning in the past decade, most of which have been conducted in the tertiary and elementary school contexts. These studies primarily adopt a qualitative approach, with a few mixed-method and

experimental and quasi-experimental studies. The reviewed studies focus primarily on five key topics: (1) vocabulary learning, (2) language skill development, (3) seamless learning, (4) learner attitudes and motivation, and (5) affordances and challenges of mobile use. Zhou's study extends our understanding of the development of mobile assisted CFL learning, which highlights an increasing call for the use of portable electronic devices in language education. Zhou concludes that it is necessary to investigate the relationship between mobile use and CFL activity design in order to provide effective mobile integrated teaching tasks and pay more attention to improving teachers' awareness and ability concerning mobile assisted instruction.

Concluding Remarks

As can be seen in the brief description above, the review studies included in this special issue include three articles on CSL/CFL literacy development, two on the use of technology in CSL/CFL education, and one on CSL/CFL learner identity development. The six review articles, although on diverse topics, all attempt to address deep-seated tensions between existent educational concepts, strategies, methods, and approaches and student learning outcomes and between existing teaching techniques and the globalization of Chinese teaching and learning. It is probably unrealistic for researchers to arrive at definite answers to the issues examined in this special issue, given the enormity of the task of promoting Chinese as an international language within and outside China. However, we expect that it may help readers achieve some shared understanding of the relevant issues and the questions and challenges raised in it can generate more meaningful reflections and discussions for further action. The special issue is limited in the scope of CSL/CFL research it presents. Nonetheless, we hope it could be a small step towards consolidating our understanding of some research issues in the field and driving the concerted efforts towards "building a more focused and stronger empirical database that can then be subject to meta-analyses to allow for extrapolations to L2A of Chinese and to SLA more generally" (Z. H. Han, 2017, p. 21)

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