

International Chinese. Impressions of Language Teaching in a Multicultural Environment in China

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School Profile

In March/April 2010 I interned at Taihu International School in China. Through observation and practical experience as well as interviews conducted with several Chinese teachers, I hoped to gain a more profound understanding of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. In particular, I intended to learn something about the everyday tasks and challenges of Chinese educators teaching Chinese to mostly foreign children in China in the multilingual environment of an international school.

The school is located in Wuxi, one of the fast-developing cities of the Changjiang Delta. In the last decade, more and more ‘foreign experts’ from Europe, the US, Australia, Japan and other countries have started work there, moving their families along in the process. They have thus created a need for schools that provide education for children with an international background. Since 2005 an especially large number of families from South Korea have relocated to the city. Like their non-Asian counterparts, they are ‘expats’ – employees of foreign companies on short-term international assignments – and should not be confused with Chinese nationals of Korean descent.

The school is an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School and at the time of this internship had been authorized for the IB Primary Years Programme (PYP) and the IB Middle Years Programme (MYP). The IB is an educational non-profit foundation with “formal consultative relations”¹ to UNESCO. Founded in 1968 and based in Geneva, Switzerland, it offers its three educational programmes (PYP, MYP and DP (Diploma Programme)) to schools worldwide.

Each programme includes a curriculum and pedagogy, student assessment appropriate to the age range, professional development for teachers and a process of school authorization and evaluation.²

There are currently over 3,300 IB schools in more than 140 countries worldwide.³ IB lists “intercultural understanding and respect”⁴ and high quality in education among its main goals. At the time of my internship the Taihu

¹ Online: <www.ibo.org/partnerships/governments/>.

² Online: <www.ibo.org/who/slideb.cfm>.

³ Online: <www.ibo.org/facts/schoolstats/progsbycountry.cfm>.

⁴ Online: <www.ibo.org/mission/>.

school had 145 students and 40 teachers, with classes from kindergarten level through upper middle school. It is foreign owned and privately run. Current Chinese law stipulates that admission is only possible for children who hold passports recognised as foreign by the Chinese government or for Chinese citizens who have residency permits for a foreign country or have previously studied overseas. Therefore, Chinese children are only very rarely enrolled, although there are always a few students with a Chinese-language background, either because a parent is Chinese or because they come from Chinese Malaysian, Chinese Singaporean or Taiwanese families.

Chinese Department/Mandarin Curriculum (Primary School)

The school's Chinese department consists of six teachers, all of whom are native Chinese speakers. As qualified education professionals, they hold bachelor's or master's degrees in Chinese as a Second Language.

In primary school (P3–P8, ages 5–11) and middle school (M1–M4, ages 11–15) students attend Mandarin lessons four times a week for 45 minutes. Depending on skill level and language background, the students in each class are placed in one of up to four learning groups (Beginners, Intermediate Low and High, Advanced). The advanced group is usually reserved for native speakers. This guarantees very small groups of two to eight students in primary school and even smaller ones in middle school. Currently there are 20 Chinese groups in P3–P8. In middle school there are nine groups, six of which are single student 'groups'.

In 2008, after becoming an IB candidate, the department started work on a new Mandarin curriculum, advised by the English as a Second Language department and the head of school. The IB provided guidelines for curriculum development, and teachers attended workshops for curricula training. One year of preparatory work was followed by another year of actual curriculum development. Whereas the former curriculum was not standardised and based mainly on experience, the new one is predicated on the European Council's 'Common European Framework of Reference for Languages' and the Irish 'English language proficiency benchmarks for non-English-speaking pupils at primary level'. As neither refers to Mandarin teaching in particular, there had to be a process of adaptation.

In accordance with IB requirements, any subject taught in the PYP has to be fit into a "transdisciplinary framework" of "six themes of global significance".⁵ Teachers are then required to develop topics (described as 'programmes of inquiry') that link these thematic units with particular class levels and subjects. For example, in P7 (age 10) the topic for the unit 'How We Organize Ourselves' is 'Economics', which in Mandarin class translates into

⁵ Online: <www.ibo.org/pyp/>.

the 'link topics' money and shopping. Ordinarily a thematic unit/topic lasts six weeks. While in its 'Language Scope and Sequence' (International Baccalaureate 2009) the IB formulates desired general learning outcomes for five different 'developmental phases' in the four 'continuums' of language learning (listening/speaking, viewing/presenting, reading, writing), the Chinese department had to adapt these and devise individual learning objectives for their unit lessons in respect of the different age and learning groups.

Aside from curriculum development, Mandarin tuition at the school changed through the IB application mainly in that the timetable was revised slightly, so that actual lesson time per student increased. Also, separate Chinese culture lessons were given up; instead Chinese culture is now integrated into the Chinese-language curriculum. Furthermore, students in each class are divided into more learning groups according to skill level than before. Lessons and units from the former curriculum that proved valuable were assimilated into the current one, e. g. the Chinese New Year celebration.

The Chinese curriculum is currently undergoing a two-year review process. This is being undertaken through a practical approach according to IB requirements and day-to-day teaching experience. The whole Chinese department as well as the PYP and MYP coordinators are involved in the process. In general, the new curriculum is more detailed and more standardised than the former one, while retaining a flexible and creative approach. Curriculum development as part of the IB process has had the positive effect of increasing the Chinese department's collaboration with other departments and its involvement with the school faculty and administration. On the downside, a higher administrative workload as well as the requirements of planning and assessment have proven to be quite time-consuming.

Aims and Purposes

The school stresses the importance of fostering an understanding and appreciation of China as a host country. It strives to teach the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking in a balanced manner to develop knowledge, skills and understanding about Mandarin language and culture. With regard to the main objective of teaching Chinese, there are different expectations for different skill levels.

For beginners, the approach is mainly practical: the aim is to enable students to communicate in Chinese at a basic level in order to help them manage everyday social situations in China, like making friends and shopping. Another goal is to give them a basic understanding of some simple characters they might encounter in daily life.

The objective for the intermediate group is to give students a solid foundation in Chinese so that they are able to continue their studies in another country.

For Korean students the situation is slightly different from that of non-Asian children, since Chinese as an additional language is more prevalent in Korea than in Europe or North America. Accordingly, the expectations of Korean students are generally higher.

Advanced students, meaning native Chinese speakers, should master a thorough grasp of oral and written Chinese in accordance with their age. However, it is difficult to bring them up to par with their age group in a Chinese school, especially regarding the written language, because much less time is allotted to Chinese tuition at an international school than at a local one.

Overall, the Chinese department, in keeping with the school's general aims, strives to enable students to get to know China and the Chinese language through first-hand information. It aspires to make their lives in the country easier and to convey a positive view of China. Beyond that, there is a hope that these children will become internationally minded "ambassadors of cultural exchange," because, in the words of one Chinese teacher, "the world needs to understand China."

Challenges

A diverse student body. Currently the school has students from 20 different countries. Approximately half the students are from South Korea. The German contingent is next in size, albeit considerably smaller than the Korean. Other home countries have included Australia, Belgium, Burundi, Canada, China, the Czech Republic, France, Holland, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, the UK and the USA.

At the time of this internship most students had been enrolled for less than three years. This is due to the high mobility of foreign families, who, working under fixed-term contracts, usually live in China for a limited time only.

Assessment and advancement. Since the language of instruction is English, most students have to adapt to being taught in a language different from their mother tongue. A large proportion of the children, regardless of their ages, therefore take on Chinese as a third language. Approximately 70% of new students have no knowledge of Chinese on arrival. Most of the rest know only some oral Chinese. Out of 145 students at the time of my internship, only five or six were native speakers.

Since it is not unusual for students to arrive at different times during the school year and their Chinese language skills are not determined by age, but by how long they have stayed in China, assessment is taken very seriously. For every student, there is a Chinese placement test on arrival as well as at the start of each school year. Additionally, for every six-week teaching unit

there is a pre-assessment in reading and writing at the start and a summative assessment at the end.

Advancement between levels is decided on a case-by-case basis. In primary school there is no limit to staying at the beginners' stage, whereas in middle school there is a limit of two years. Normally students advance by one level after one to two years. Korean students on average progress more quickly than non-Asians. This is attributed by some teachers to their having "a sense of characters". However, many Korean students also have private Chinese tuition at home.

Differentiation. Internal differentiation is a major challenge. Each class is divided into three or four learning groups according to skill level; yet Chinese levels within the groups are still different due to the high level of student fluctuation. Students are therefore often assigned different tasks suitable for their respective levels, while about 20 minutes per lesson are retained for common study time as a class.

Students are encouraged to help each other during lessons for their mutual benefit; however, children chatting in their mother tongues can pose a discipline issue. Therefore, students are asked to use as much Chinese as possible in Chinese lessons, as well as English as a common language. New students who have neither English nor Chinese skills start Chinese tuition with basic Pinyin initials and finals, followed by simple characters and sentences.

Teaching materials. The task of finding suitable resources that match the IB requirements proved to be quite demanding. Somewhat ironically, most local Chinese choices were found to be unsuitable. The working materials favoured at the time of my internship were textbooks, workbooks and posters from the series *Easy Steps to Chinese*, 2–5 (Beijing Language and Culture University Press) in primary school, and *Chinese Made Easy*, 1–5 (Joint Publishing Co., Hong Kong) in middle school. However, additional materials are also used.

Intercultural communication. Intercultural competence is a part of the teacher training, and teaching units include "cultural" topics. However, these seem to be mainly of a folkloristic nature – for instance, information about Chinese holidays. The diversity of the student body is acknowledged by encouraging them to participate in cultural activities. In addition to the Spring Festival and Christmas celebrations, the school celebrates an annual International Day where families of every nationality have the opportunity to represent their culture through food, games, songs, dress or other activities. Different ways of spending holidays are compared – for example Korean parents introduce how Koreans celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival and Lunar New Year.

Cultural differences also lead to different attitudes on the parents' part towards Chinese as a subject. Accordingly, the students' approach is influ-

enced by how much their parents value the opportunity of Chinese tuition. Some – mostly non-Asian – parents do not consider learning Chinese a priority in their children’s education on the grounds that the children are likely to spend only a limited time in the country. Due to their country’s relative geographical and cultural proximity, Korean parents are generally more interested in having their children taught Chinese. Homework can be a tricky issue: Western parents tend to complain about too much homework, Koreans about too little. The school supports the Chinese department in trying to introduce all students to the reality of life in China which is different from the “expat bubble” through, for instance, community work projects.

Mediators Caught in the Middle?

Even considering the acknowledged challenges of assessment, differentiation and materials, the teachers generally agree that the changes implemented with IB authorization helped to improve the standard of Chinese tuition. The detailed requirements for continuous planning and evaluation, the IB-related teacher training, and the curriculum revision work have led them to examine their concepts of spoken and written language teaching. Both teachers and students have certainly profited from this, in that both oral and writing skills are seen as valid and integral components of language learning.

However, Chinese teachers here are not just language mediators but also cultural intermediaries. As such, their position is particularly interesting. While my overall impression was that the school cultivates a spirit of cooperation and communication, I came to question whether Chinese and non-Chinese teachers and administrators sufficiently reflect on their respective cultural attitudes, which may include critical differences in value systems and communication behaviour.

One example seemed to me to illustrate how cultural attitudes are transported along with the apparent content of a lesson, in this case a Chinese “traditional culture” lesson.

In the Clay Figurine Club, an after-school activity that introduces students to the time-honoured local craft of clay modelling, the task was to mold a tiger following the instructor’s example. The artisan as well as the supervising teachers discouraged any attempts at free-forming, asking students to model their tigers as closely as possible on the presented prototype, so that they were essentially copying it. Even allowing for the general necessity in primary school to establish standards of execution, e. g. in the writing of letters or characters, one could argue that in a Western educational context clay modelling as a facultative activity would serve to encourage students’ creative self-expression. Clearly there was a different objective here. This unexpressed divergence of possible approaches seems to me to highlight the ‘Chinese International’ teacher’s dilemma.

Specifically, the IB programmes, while claiming to be guided by a spirit of internationalism, appear to me to transport values that are generally unquestioned in Western pedagogics, but may not be as unanimously accepted in Chinese culture and society. For example, the IB ‘PYP attitudes’⁶ that are posted in classrooms advocate qualities like independence and creativity that in an educational context in China may in fact appear foreign in every sense. While it is comprehensible that an international school would want to implement these values, I wonder whether such foreign notions are something that Chinese teachers are simply exposed to with an expectation of their eventual compliance or are genuinely engaged in. Goodwill notwithstanding and regardless of provenance, the power of cultural imprint is not easily overcome; nor does it have to be, provided educators reflect upon and adequately articulate cultural contradictions instead of having contrasting approaches remain implicit.

References

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Abstract

Beobachtungen während eines Praktikums im Chinesischunterricht an einer internationalen Schule in China

Dieser Beitrag dokumentiert Beobachtungen während eines Praktikums im Chinesischunterricht an einer durch das International Baccalaureate (IB) autorisierten internationalen Schule in China. Im Blickpunkt stehen dabei vor allem die Bemühungen der chinesischen Lehrkräfte, mit den besonderen Herausforderungen eines solchen multikulturellen und multilingualen Umfelds umzugehen – unter Berücksichtigung der interkulturellen Kommunikation nicht nur als Bestandteil des Unterrichts, sondern als zentrale, jedoch bisher unterbewertete Problematik der Position der Chinesischlehrkraft in einem solchen Umfeld. In diesem Kontext wird hinterfragt, inwieweit die notwendige Reflexion inhärenter kultureller Normen im Unterricht und in der pädagogischen Konzeption stattfindet.

⁶ Online: <www.ibo.org/communications/powerpoint/.../PYPPPtIBwebsite81203sp.ppt>.