

Exploring the Current State of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language in Primary and Secondary Schools: Issues and Countermeasures

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Abstract: *Amid the increasingly mature cultural exchanges between China and the international community, the discipline of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) has progressively developed into a more systematic and diversified field. As the global demand for Chinese language education expands, learner populations have become more heterogeneous, necessitating pedagogical approaches that are context-sensitive and learner-specific. In particular, the instruction of Chinese at the primary and secondary level presents distinct challenges and demands targeted strategies that differ from those applied in higher education or adult learning contexts. This study examines the current state of Chinese language instruction in primary and secondary schools affiliated with a Romanian institution of higher education, serving as a representative case for analyzing broader issues within the region. Focusing on three core dimensions—namely, teacher resources, the utilization and adaptation of instructional materials, and pedagogical methodologies—the paper investigates the principal obstacles hindering effective Chinese language teaching and learning at these educational levels.*

Keywords: Chinese as a foreign language; Primary and secondary school language; Teaching strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, expanding cultural openness and implementing educational exchanges have been effective ways for civilizations to learn from each other worldwide; Building confidence in Chinese culture has also become an important measure to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the Chinese Dream. In order to strengthen the extensive cultural and educational exchanges between China and Romania, and to spread traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucian culture, the Confucius Institute in Cluj, Romania was established.

The college has been established for 10 years now. In addition to having a headquarters teaching point in the Kruj region, it has also opened five teaching points in Arad, Bayamare, Bistricha, Hunedola, and Oradea. Each teaching point offers long-term free primary and secondary school interest classes, as well as paid adult language training classes. The headquarters teaching point also offers paid calligraphy classes, music classes, as well as Chinese major courses, Chinese minor courses, and Chinese elective courses jointly offered with the local "Babish Boyai" university. The Arad teaching site collaborates with the local Vasily Gordish Western University to offer Chinese language courses, and the Bayamare teaching site also offers Chinese credit courses at the local George Xinkai High School.

Throughout the entire teaching area of the Kruger Confucius Institute, students have shown a strong interest in learning Chinese language and culture. Taking the Kruj headquarters teaching point as an example, there are a total of 9 primary and secondary schools that cooperate with it, offering more than 30 Chinese interest classes and radiating to nearly a thousand local primary and secondary school students, achieving certain educational results and achieving the goal of cultural exchange and dissemination.

However, the Kruj Confucius Institute also encountered some unavoidable problems during its operation. Due to the imperfect attendance system and the difficulty of Chinese grammar, there is a significant loss of students in the middle and later stages of each semester, which has become a bottleneck in the education of the Confucius Institute and to some extent restricts its effective and sustainable development.

The author served as a volunteer Chinese language teacher at the Confucius Institute in Cluj, Romania from October 2018 to July 2020. Through nearly two years of teaching experience and insights, combined with the

basic laws of Chinese language learning, the author conducted some useful discussions on the relevant issues of interest classes in primary and secondary schools at the Cluj headquarters teaching point from the three aspects of "teacher resources", "textbook use", and "teaching methods", and put forward some practical suggestions in this article.

In terms of teacher resources, the study identifies shortages in professionally trained instructors, limited opportunities for ongoing professional development, and a lack of localized teaching expertise as critical constraints. With regard to instructional materials, the over-reliance on imported textbooks originally designed for different cultural and linguistic contexts often results in mismatches between content and learners' cognitive and linguistic readiness. Furthermore, current teaching methodologies tend to be insufficiently diversified and insufficiently interactive, failing to fully engage younger learners or address their developmental needs.

In response to these challenges, this paper proposes a series of targeted measures and strategic recommendations. These include strengthening localized teacher training programs, promoting the adaptation and development of culturally and age-appropriate instructional resources, and encouraging the adoption of interactive, task-based, and technology-enhanced pedagogical models. Through the implementation of such approaches, it is anticipated that both instructional efficiency and learning outcomes among primary and secondary school students in the region can be significantly enhanced.

Ultimately, by advancing pedagogical effectiveness and fostering sustainable development in Chinese language education at the grassroots level, this research seeks to contribute to the broader goal of promoting Chinese language and cultural literacy internationally. The findings aim to provide both theoretical insights and practical guidance for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers engaged in the global dissemination of Chinese language and culture.

2. TEACHER RESOURCES

2.1 Basic Status of Teacher Allocation

2.1.1 Chinese language teachers generally lack teaching experience in primary and secondary schools

The Cluj Confucius Institute in Romania was established in collaboration between Zhejiang University of Science and Technology in China and the local "Babish Boyai" university in Cluj. Most of the Chinese language teacher volunteers in this college are master's students majoring in Chinese international education or undergraduate graduates in related majors. Due to the lack of relevant training on teaching strategies for primary and secondary school students in this university, many volunteers are not clear about how to teach Chinese as a foreign language in primary and secondary schools. The learning psychology and state of adolescent students are different from adults. In addition to teaching strategies, the personality charm and academic foundation of teachers are also key factors affecting students and teaching.

2.1.2 Relatively Lack of Excellent Teachers

Although Romania is located in Europe, in recent years, master's students majoring in Chinese International Education at Zhejiang University of Science and Technology have shown less enthusiasm for applying to the Confucius Institute in Cluj. After screening and examination by the Office of the Chinese National Chinese International Promotion Leadership Group (hereinafter referred to as Hanban), the number of qualified teachers has decreased, leaving little room for the Chinese and foreign deans of the Confucius Institute to choose from when interviewing Chinese teacher volunteers. This has led to a relative shortage of new Chinese teachers, especially high-quality teachers, at the Confucius Institute. As the demand for learning Chinese increases, the number of volunteers also needs to increase accordingly. Therefore, the Confucius Institute needs the assistance of Hanban to adjust and send out unsuccessful volunteers who comply with the adjustment. Many of the applicants graduated from majors unrelated to teaching Chinese as a foreign language, such as finance and dance. Despite participating in relevant training organized by Hanban, this type of Chinese language teacher volunteer still needs a buffer period to learn and adapt after taking office. The mismatch between the teacher's profession and the teaching content will inevitably result in poor teaching effectiveness.

2.1.3 Language barriers reduce the effectiveness of teaching

Teaching for adults can use English as a medium, but the English proficiency of local primary and secondary school students is not yet high enough, which inevitably requires Chinese language teachers to master a certain level of Romanian in order to better cope with teaching. However, the Romanian language proficiency of the Chinese language teacher volunteers currently on duty is almost non-existent, which poses a significant obstacle to teaching. Chinese teacher volunteers at headquarters teaching sites generally rely on the translation of teaching assistants, who are all Chinese major students. However, primary and secondary school students, especially elementary school students, tend to shift their attention more to the people they directly communicate with. This tortuous process is like mistaking the messenger of the command for the one who issued it. If the communication between the teacher and the teaching assistant is not effective, there may be a situation where the teaching assistant overtakes the teacher's control over the classroom pace, and students may begin to overlook the dominant position of the Chinese teacher to some extent.

2.1.4 Lack of permanent full-time teachers constrains the sustainable development of the college

Frequent replacement of teachers is extremely detrimental to the cultivation of learning habits and the development of teacher-student tacit understanding among young children. Moreover, each teacher is unable to hand over their work to the next teacher (as they have not yet taken up their position) when they leave, and students' learning progress may lag behind and become unfamiliar when the next teacher teaches. Sometimes the learning content is repeated, and sometimes the teaching content is disconnected. The current system is that the term of office for Chinese language teacher volunteers is generally one year, with a very small number of volunteers choosing to stay for another year. This will inevitably lead to the following situations:

One reason is that during the period when volunteer teachers teach overseas, most people consider this year as an internship and a process of gaining experience, and cannot fully devote themselves to teaching and teaching research;

Secondly, although the working environment seems relatively relaxed compared to China, considering family factors, only a very small number of volunteers are willing to stay abroad and engage in teaching Chinese as a foreign language;

Thirdly, most volunteers who return to their home countries do not have a close connection in terms of the nature of their work, which hinders the formation of professional and stable careers. At present, local and Chinese language teachers are very scarce in the entire Romanian region. There is only one local full-time teacher in the teaching point of the Kruj headquarters, but problems with grammar and accent also greatly reduce its teaching effectiveness.

2.2 Measures and Suggestions for Response

2.2.1 Pre job training for solid Chinese language teachers

All Chinese language teacher volunteers who are intended to be recruited should be informed during the second interview (i.e. the second interview with the Chinese dean, which is also the first time Confucius Institute has contacted volunteers) that they will be exposed to all course types during the training period. The teaching design should not only target adults and college students, but also cover primary and secondary school students, and even preschool children. Confucius Institute should provide them with specialized training in Chinese language teaching after their appointment, and the specific projects can be determined according to the types of courses offered by Confucius Institute. After the teachers take up their positions, they will conduct repeated trial lectures and polishing, and the dean will decide on the class types that each volunteer teacher is good at.

2.2.2 It is necessary to construct a diversified faculty structure

Every Confucius Institute needs to constantly inject fresh blood. In order to attract outstanding volunteers to apply for Confucius Institute, partner universities need to increase publicity efforts among students, attract and recruit diverse professional talents, such as instrumental music teachers, calligraphy teachers, dance teachers, and martial arts teachers, so that the teacher structure is reasonably equipped to meet the learning needs of different students, and enhance the social reputation and teaching effectiveness of the institute.

2.2.3 Increase training on the mother tongue of the host country

In order to solve the problem of low teaching effectiveness caused by language barriers between Chinese language teachers and students, it is suggested that pre service training for teachers should increase the intensity of specialized training on the mother tongue of the host country. After volunteering, there should also be continuous specialized training on the mother tongue of the host country, supplemented by immersive teaching, which can compensate for the many problems caused by language barriers, improve the integration of communication and learning between Chinese language teachers and local children, and thus achieve teaching goals better.

2.2.4 Focus on cultivating permanent full-time teachers

The development of Confucius Institute relies solely on the Chinese language teacher volunteers sent by Hanban every year, which may become increasingly delayed. Only localized teachers who are familiar with the local teaching system and student situation can help Confucius Institute carry out Chinese language teaching work more effectively. Therefore, the author suggests that Confucius Institute should appropriately select some "seed teachers" and provide them with professional training to promote their professional development. For example, Romanian students who graduated from Chinese majors and have a passion for Chinese language teaching can be recruited. During their studies, they can receive career guidance and relevant training, and after graduation, they can sign a long-term agreement with the university to serve as full-time Chinese language teachers. Regular seminars organized by local teachers and Chinese language teacher volunteers can also assist Chinese teachers in avoiding detours and unnecessary teaching misconceptions. In addition, in response to the problem of pronunciation and grammar deficiencies among local teachers, Confucius Institute should organize local teachers to follow excellent Chinese volunteer teachers for listening and observation learning, and learn from each other to make up for each other's shortcomings.

3. TEXTBOOK USAGE

3.1 Selection and Use of Textbooks

3.1.1 Adult oriented textbooks lack comprehensive targeting

There are currently four mainstream textbooks in the library of the Kruger Confucius Institute, namely "Contemporary Chinese" (Chinese English version, Chinese Russian version), "HSK Standard Course", "Learn Chinese with Me" (Chinese English version, Chinese Russian version), and "Happy Chinese". Among them, the Chinese major uses "Contemporary Chinese" as the student textbook, while other courses use "HSK Standard Course" as the textbook. The use of the same set of textbooks for adults, teenagers, and children reflects the unity of the textbooks, but this set of textbooks itself is more suitable for adult learning. However, for primary and secondary school students, the content is relatively obscure and difficult to understand, and its pertinence cannot reflect the cognitive rules of primary and secondary school students.

3.1.2 The textbook content is monotonous and lacks a certain level of interest

The author observed that there are several teachers at the headquarters teaching point who teach primary school students, tend to copy textbooks to students, and then mechanically repeat the teaching content. The teaching process appears dull and uninteresting, and some students have low interest and yawn while reading. If students lack the spirit of autonomy, cooperation, and inquiry based learning, simply mechanically following these adult oriented textbooks will fail to awaken their interest, and it is reasonable for their learning interest to decrease. For European and American students in their teenage years, it may be difficult to continue persevering.

3.1.3 Textbooks are not close enough to students' lives and thinking

When designing teaching for students using the HSK Standard Course, the author found that the dialogue themes in the book are more closely related to adult life, such as shopping, cooking, mountain climbing, hospitality, etc., and there are few topics that are close to the daily life and thinking patterns of primary and secondary school students. When teaching, many students, especially young students, lack life knowledge and social experience.

When learning relevant texts on these topics, they often show difficulty understanding, disinterest, or complete incomprehension.

3.1.4 Insufficient practicality of the combination of teaching and practice in textbooks

Applying what is learned is the consistent pursuit of the ultimate goal of any education and teaching. The new knowledge learned in the classroom can be flexibly applied to daily life, achieving the integration of knowledge and action. This process will inevitably promote students to better consolidate the "knowledge" they have learned and improve their oral and expression abilities. However, due to the insufficient practicality of the current textbook content, most topics cannot guide students to engage in as many practical exercises as possible after class, relying solely on "knowledge" centered teaching and learning in one class per week, lacking the combination of "experience" centered teaching and practice. Students can easily forget what they learned last week in the second week.

3.2 Measures and Suggestions for Response

3.2.1 Select targeted textbooks

Confucius Institute can appropriately adopt Chinese textbooks specifically designed for the cognitive patterns of young children. Compared to adult oriented textbooks, such textbooks are more interesting and closer to students' thinking and life. With teachers' "teaching according to students' aptitude", students' ability to accept textbooks will be greatly improved, and they will also develop a stronger interest in Chinese in the classroom, thereby strengthening their determination and confidence to continue learning Chinese.

3.2.2 Based on actual independent research and development

Volunteer teachers responsible for teaching in primary and secondary schools can also independently develop "school-based courses," "class based courses," or even "student based courses" based on their existing teaching materials and their own teaching experience, to build a Chinese learning curriculum system that is close to the daily lives of local primary and secondary school students and conforms to their thinking rules. Although this workload is large and difficult, it can be twice as effective in stimulating students' interest in learning Chinese and promoting teachers' professional growth.

3.2.3 Add topics that are closer to daily life

When designing teaching materials, teachers should consider the receptive ability of the teaching objects, be close to the "zone of proximal development" of students, make generative preset judgments on students' feedback, and then adjust the difficulty of the textbook content appropriately. They should effectively supplement the basic parts and details in the form of "learning material reconstruction" to ensure that students' cognitive and thinking qualities of new knowledge are improved in the classroom, in order to better achieve teaching objectives.

3.2.4 Textbook content focuses on practicality

Innovative teaching design should also return to practicality, which is an effective path to achieving teaching goals. In order to enable students to actively "practice" the knowledge they have learned after class, the content of textbooks should focus more on practicality, and try to go beyond polite language and daily social demonstrations. More materials that primary and secondary school students are interested in and can be applied to real life should be added, such as numbers, animals and plants, stationery, games, animations, etc. Of course, academic materials should also be appropriately reflected and highlighted in students' core competencies such as aesthetics and culture.

4. TEACHING METHODS

4.1 Selection and effectiveness of teaching methods

4.1.1 Teaching methods still appear monotonous and weak

As mentioned earlier, some teachers still adhere to adult language teaching translation and reading methods when facing primary and secondary school students, focusing more on grammar teaching and neglecting children's cognitive level and rules. They lack the "student preparation" section of teaching design, making the classroom appear somewhat dull and monotonous. The study habits of European and American students differ greatly from those of Asian students, and classroom demands should be relatively free and active. If teachers do not change their teaching strategies and still treat local students as Chinese students, engaging in traditional Chinese teaching methods such as "cramming" "injecting" or "selling knowledge" it will inevitably cause local students to develop a "resistance" mentality towards learning.

4.1.2 Unscientific methods leading to poor teaching effectiveness

When teachers design teaching for primary and secondary schools, the combination of teaching content and teaching methods is not very reasonable, coupled with language communication barriers, resulting in slow learning progress and inability to achieve teaching goals. Over time, both teachers and students will inevitably experience a certain degree of anxiety. So, how to scientifically design every aspect of classroom teaching is a major problem that teachers urgently need to solve in the teaching process.

4.1.3 Outdated and rigid teaching methods

The inherent teaching mode of teachers may help students familiarize themselves with the pace of the classroom, but the prerequisite should be that the teaching mode constructed by this teaching method is excellent and efficient. If the method remains unchanged, falls into a trap, and has weak adaptability, students will reject and become tired of it, and student attrition will become an inevitable trend. The decrease in teaching efficiency is also the "meaning of the problem". Therefore, the outdated and rigid teaching methods are one of the direct reasons for the unfavorable development of Confucius Institute.

4.1.4 Insufficient awakening function of teaching methods

A good educational method focuses on "awakening" - awakening students' hobbies, interests, and inner passions. This should be the rightful meaning and top priority of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. However, the reality of teaching is not optimistic, as teachers tend to focus more on imparting knowledge and less on stimulating interest; More repetitive reading and memorization, less practical consolidation; Practice more low-level exercises and less high-level divergence.

4.2 Measures and Suggestions for Response

4.2.1 Need to continuously update teaching methods

Teaching has methods, but there is no fixed method. Pay attention to the learning situation and teach according to students' aptitude, which is the basic principle for teachers to choose teaching methods. Teachers should be good at introducing rich and innovative teaching methods into the classroom, such as game based teaching, perception based teaching, situational deduction based teaching, embodied cultural teaching, etc., so that students can implement the knowledge points learned in the preset "real situation". This not only increases the fun of the classroom, but also enhances the practicality of teaching. It is an effective choice that can kill two birds with one stone and effectively reduce the boredom and boredom in both teaching and learning.

4.2.2 Need to gradually implement hierarchical teaching

Teaching has an inherent logic, and students' learning also has an inherent regularity. Teachers need to carefully and patiently observe and create different learning atmospheres for different classes. They need to study students' real motivations and needs for learning Chinese, and form a "big data" of teaching needs. Teachers need to adjust teaching content and methods according to their own needs, carefully design teaching plans, and use scientific teaching methods to practice different exercises at each stage, with clear levels and rich content, to implement teaching objectives.

4.2.3 Regular self reflective discussions are required

Professor Ye Lan said that a teacher who writes a lifelong lesson plan may not necessarily become a renowned teacher; If a teacher can write reflections for three years, they may become a renowned teacher. When there are problems in the teaching process, especially when it leads to a large loss of students, if it is not a problem of missing the school's direction and goals, nor is it a problem of the teacher's own professional and teaching abilities, teachers should reflect on the validity of their teaching methods in a timely manner - whether teaching has kept up with the changing pace of the times? Have you followed the students' agile thinking? In the early stages of students' aversion to learning, teachers should adjust their teaching methods, even prepare lessons collectively, conduct discussions, exchange ideas, brainstorm, collide ideas, and optimize teaching.

4.2.4 Need for multiple evaluations to promote student interest

Interest is the best teacher. Today's teaching world is undergoing several transformations, including the transition from the classroom to the classroom; The transition from "learning" to "being able to learn"; The transformation from "learning well" to "being eager to learn", and from "nurturing talents" to "educating people". This is particularly important for teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Chinese is not only knowledge, but also culture, and the source of vitality for the Chinese nation. This requires teaching evaluation to present a diversified direction. Teachers should implement teaching based on students' interests, concerns, and hobbies, in order to achieve the exchange and dissemination of culture and education.

Confucius Institutes are non-profit international educational institutions, and their development and growth should also depend on the quality of teaching. Only by retaining students, stimulating interest, and awakening love can Confucius Institutes fulfill their historical mission of spreading culture, exchanging ideas, and learning from each other's civilizations. The author believes that the mission is glorious and the road ahead is long, requiring us teachers to constantly strive and forge ahead.

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