Developing Mandarin Chinese Teaching in British Schools

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Abstract

This paper focuses on current provision for foreign language education, especially Mandarin Chinese education in UK schools. Through the analysis of reforms in Chinese language and the nature of Chinese characters, I argue that Mandarin Chinese can be acquired by learners brought up in an alphabetic language system and should be offered as a non-traditional foreign language subject by more British schools. The aim of this paper is to join in the current debate of language curriculum in the UK and to call for further development of Mandarin Chinese as curriculum in British schools.

Key Words: Language Policy; Language Drain; Mandarin Chinese; GCSE Curriculum; Monolingual English; Non-traditional Foreign Language

1. Introduction

The 21st century witnesses extensive technological, economic, political and social changes. These changes, along with migration, combine to produce a global community of great diversity. In order to embrace and promote the diversity of this new world stage, education plays the role of 'liberator' and 'gateway' to transfer lives of the young generation. In multiethnic and multilingual contexts, language education has been a most pressing issue since the 20th century. More and more language professionals express their concerns over monolingualism in English risking losing the share of the world marketplace (i.e. Graddol, 2006; Manzo and Zehr, 2006). Concomitantly, the campaign for 'English only' in schools has gained momentum (Roy-Campbell, 2001).

In the global economy, British young people should be given the skills to learn another language. Failure to do so will put the country and economy at a major disadvantage internationally. However, language deficiency has already been identified as a serious problem to British companies and their employment. The number of bilingual or multilingual British graduates is so limited that UK business has to hire more and more foreign staff to acquire greater international competitiveness. Therefore, there has been an increasing call for compulsory foreign language education in British secondary schools. Focusing on the pros and

cons of spreading non-traditional foreign languages, such as Mandarin Chinese, in schools' language education, I argue that Mandarin Chinese should be learned by all pupils in schools in order to enable them to meet the challenges of the 21st century. In order to provide up-to-date information, many online news reports will be referenced.

2. Mandarin Chinese teaching and learning in England and Scotland

Aiming for a bright economy future and an opening window to a new world, many British schools have taught Mandarin Chinese as a compulsory language subject. In England, for example, Kingsford community school, as a pioneer, has made Mandarin Chinese part of its core curriculum for all pupils in years 8 and 9 since it opened in September 2000 (Arnot, 2006). Brighton College also claims to make Mandarin Chinese a compulsory subject for all pupils from September of 2006. The headmaster of Brighton College, Richard Cairns, have led the way to join the Mandarin Chinese class as a pupil in order to show how important he regards this new subject (Guardian, 2006). Mandarin Chinese has also been made a compulsory subject in some Scottish schools. Pioneering in Chinese teaching, St George's School for Girls in Edinburgh and Hillhead High in Glasgow have offered Mandarin Chinese as part of the Language Curriculum for some years now, and the learning outcomes of both schools are impressive (see McClure's speech).

However, although Mandarin Chinese has become a thriving non-traditional modern language curriculum in some British schools, it should also be recognized that Chinese teaching is far from perfect. Despite the number of formers taking Chinese at A-level 'has risen by almost 50% since 2001', and 'there have been 40% more candidates at GCSE', 'this growth is from a very low base' (Arnot, 2006). Isabella Moore, the director of the National Centre for Languages (CILT), points out, '[o]nly around 3,000 candidates sat GCSE Chinese last year, compared to some 50,000 sitting French and 100,000 German ... Entries at A-level stood around the 2,000 mark in 2005, compared to around 12,000 for French and 5,000 each for German and Spanish.' (Arnot, 2006) Furthermore, Chinese teaching is still under-assessed. There has been no exam in Mandarin set by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) so far, even by the aforementioned St George's School and Hillhead High (Schofield, 2006).

Low entries and absence of assessment are just part of the problem; the difficulty of Chinese teaching and learning is also an especially intimidating barrier to promoting this burgeoning language nation-wide. Jo Redford, the head of languages of Tile Hill Wood Language College in Coventry, an advocat of teaching traditional modern languages, saying that '[w]e can't just switch because a new language becomes fashionable.' (Arnot, 2006) According to some experts, in order to hold a conversation in Mandarin and to read a newspaper or a book, a minimum of 4,000 Chinese characters are supposed to be mastered (Chinese Language Programme, 1997). Therefore, even schools with specialist status in languages are not all rushing to pick up the challenge to promote the Mandarin Chinese curriculum (Arnot, 2006).

3. Decoding Chinese language

It is accepted that learning Chinese is considered to be challenging not only for second / foreign-language learners, but also for first language learners of Chinese in the initial years. Some Chinese linguisticians describe Chinese pronunciation by the terms 'complexity' and 'opaque sound-shape'; while Chinese characters are devoid of 'explicit and reliable grapheme-phoneme correspondent rules' (Liu, 2005). There are 46,964 traditional Chinese characters encompassed in the *Kangxi Dictionary*, the standard Chinese dictionary during the 18th and 19th centuries (Chinese Language Programme, 1997). Therefore, Coulmas (1989: 106) says, '…mastery of the Chinese script was the prerogative of a very small elite…'

However, recognizing the difficulties in Chinese language learning, successive Chinese governments have put language reforms at the centre of the policy agenda since the beginning of the 20th century. In 1958, the Chinese government adopted Hanyu Pinyin as an official system parallel to the Chinese character script. This alphabetic writing system with the standard 26 Roman letters is used not only simply as a phonetic-notating device, but also as an effective instructional strategy of Chinese language. Moreover, in 1987, the national language committee and national education committee compiled the Xiandai Hanyu Changyongzi Biao (Modern Chinese Commonly-Used Word List). It condenses the total number of Chinese characters and simplifies strokes of traditional characters. Reforms in Chinese language have facilitated Chinese literacy education (Liu, 2005).

3.1 Introduction of Hanyu Pinyin system

The introduction of Pinyin in teaching of Mandarin Chinese to children has provided an effective pedagogy not only for first-language but also for second / foreign-language learners of Chinese. Non-native Chinese learners will build linguistic competence in the same way that they acquire English language, provided by Pinyin-annotated reading material. Pinyin can be easily and quickly learnt by children, and then greatly encourages and develops their interest in learning the language and other fields of knowledge after a few weeks of schooling (Liu, 2005). At St George's School for Girls in Edinburgh mentioned above, young children make remarkable progress in learning Mandarin Chinese during the first years. 'Pupils show great interest and eagerness on learning Chinese language.' (McClure, 2006)

3.2 Condensed and simplified Chinese characters

Firstly, the total number of commonly-used Chinese characters is manageable. The Xiandai Hanyu Changyongzi Biao (Modern Chinese Commonly-Used Word List) complied in 1987 has left out a large number of rarely-used variants characters encompassed in the Kangxi dictionary. It lists 2,500 the most frequently-used Chinese characters, as well as 1,000 less-than-common characters (Chinese Language Programme, 1997). Jerry (2005) suggests that a knowledge of 3,000 characters can be considered literate, and less than that for basic daily communication.

Secondly, diminishing the number of strokes in a given character, modern Chinese characters are much easier to write. There are no regular rules for simplifying

traditional Chinese characters. Some are simplified by replacing all occurrences of a certain component with a simplified variant of the same component. Some, however, may be simplified irregularly, with forms that are very dissimilar to and unpredictable from traditional characters. Nowadays, simplified Chinese characters are used and taught in Mainland China. Although it remains controversial decades of the effect of simplified characters on the language after their introduction, there is no doubt that learners have benefited a lot from simplified forms (Lu, 1987).

3.3 Pictographic and pictophonetic nature

Even though Chinese characters have been simplified, it is still hard for some second-language learners of Chinese to remember strokes of characters. In this point, some understanding of the pictographic and pictophonetic nature of Chinese language will make its teaching and learning more effective. The earliest written words have been found in China by archaeologists. Carved into tortoise shells, those 'schematized' or 'stylized' symbols bear similarities to Chinese written characters used thousands of years later (Rincon, 2003). The following chart will help to build association between picturesque symbols and evolved Chinese characters.

The example shows the development of Chinese characters. It is easy to see that in early stages, Chinese characters are dominated by pictograms, in which meanings are expressed directly by shapes.

The Chinese linguist and senior member of the Department of Philosophy and Social Science of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Lu (1987), estimates that 18% of the total Chinese characters are pictographic in nature; of remaining ones, they largely belong to the pictophonetics group, during which 36% have clear information about their pronunciation; 48% have partial information.

Oracle Bone Script	Seal Script	Regular Script (Traditional)	Regular Script (Simplified)	Pinyin	Meaning
☉	日	日	—	rì	Sun
☽	夕	月	—	yuè	Moon
⛰	山	山	—	shān	Mountain
川	水	水	—	shuǐ	Water

𝍢	雨	雨	—	yǔ	Rain
⽊	朮	木	—	mù	Wood
禾	朮	禾	—	hé	Rice Plant
丿	入	人	—	rén	Human
女	女	女	—	nǔ	Woman
母	母	母	—	mǔ	Mother
目	目	目	—	mù	Eye
牛	半	牛	—	niú	Ox

Pictophonetics are also called semantic-phonetic compounds, or phono-semantic compounds. Characters of this sort usually comprise two parts: a pictograph and a phonetic part, which suggests the general meaning of the character and the pronunciation derived from respectively. Examples are 河 (hé) river, 湖 (hú) lake, 流 (liú) stream, 沖 (chōng) riptide, 滑 (huá) slippery. All these characters have on the left a radical (the meaning of a character that is derived from simple characters) of three dots, which is a simplified pictograph for a water drop, indicating that the character has a semantic connection with water; the right-hand side in each case is a phonetic indicator. For example, in the case of 沖 (chōng), the phonetic indicator is 中 (zhōng), (itself means middle), which shows the divergence of the pronunciation from its phonetic indicator (Lu, 1987).

As reported by Asthana (2006), '[d]ull lessons are causing pupils to switch off and have created a crisis in language teaching'. Given the pictographic and pictophonetic nature of Chinese language, it is anticipated that students under alphabetic language system will be attracted.

4. Conclusion

As Prime Minister Tony Blair (2005) said, '[t]his country will succeed or fail on the basis of how it changes itself and gears up to this new economy, based on knowledge'. The knowledge

of language, being hugely important to the future economic prosperity of this country, without any doubt, deserves to be given full attention. In order to improve the nation's language skill, and assure British school-leavers to have equal employment opportunities with their international counterparts, foreign language courses should remain mandatory through secondary education.

In the meantime, in order to equip British young children with more international competitiveness, and add an extra cultural dimension to their understanding of the world, it also expected that Mandarin Chinese will be given full support as a non-traditional foreign language subject. In this island 'basking complacently in the warm glow of linguistic globalization' (Guardian, 2005), let us welcome and work together for a true sense of multilingual education in the 21st century.

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