Chapter 2
The Present: An Overview of Teaching Chinese Language in Singapore

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The Current Singapore's Sociolinguistic Background

The sociolinguistic landscape of Singapore has in recent years been a prominent and unique case for language and social study that bestows the nation with a new title of 'language laboratory', besides acclaims like 'Asia's four little dragons' or 'Garden City' (Yang 2011). Indeed, the swiftness and scale of language change in Singapore in the last 30 years may be unprecedented amongst nation states. In multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual Singapore, English has now become not only the most important lingua franca but also the dominant language in daily usage amongst the majority of Singaporeans, especially the young. There are two sets of important statistics reflecting the changing linguistic background of Chinese in Singapore:

Firstly, the Census of Population 2010 (Singapore Department of Statistic 2011) highlighted that the use of English as the home language has become more prevalent which is in line with the rise of English literacy especially amongst the younger age groups. Notably, English was the home language for 52 % of Chinese Singaporeans aged 5–14 years. Secondly, in 2009, 59 % of Primary 1 Chinese students' parents reported that they spoke mainly English at home. This was a large increase from 28 % in 1991 (Ministry of Education 2011; see Fig. 2.1).

Figure 2.1 shows the trend of a shift in dominant family language amongst all three races. The gradient of the three lines is steepest for the Chinese, reflecting that it has the fastest shift into speaking English as a dominant family language. Many scholars have even attributed the problems and challenges faced in Chinese-language teaching and learning to this shift in home language environment (Tan 2011; Liu et al. 2006; Goh 2012). While many academic papers have based their

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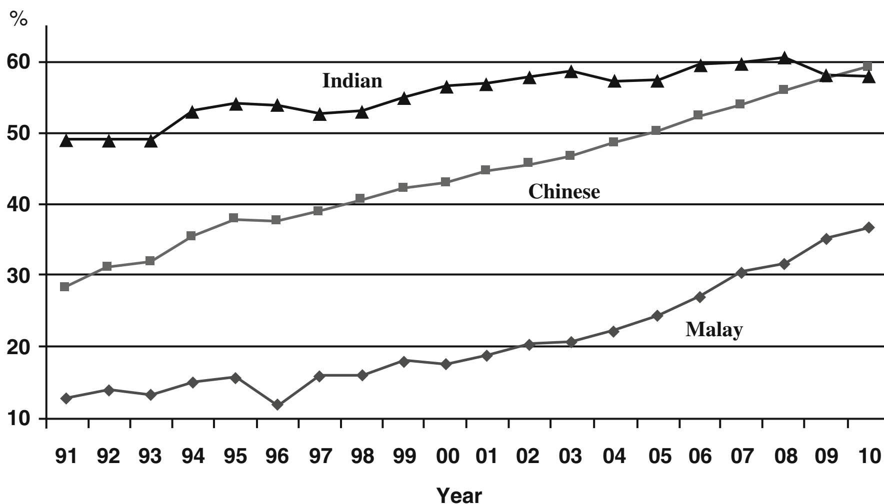


Fig. 2.1 Proportion of Primary 1 students speaking English most frequently at home

Table 2.1 Language P6 students used to communicate with their family (200)

% of P6 students who spoke to their family in	Mother tongue languages (MTL)		
	Chinese language	Malay language	Tamil language
English only and English mostly	38	17	38
English only	8	3	12
English most of the time and MTL occasionally	30	14	26
English and MTL just as frequently	25	33	33
MTL only and MTL mostly	37	50	30
MTL most of the time and English occasionally	25	37	23
MTL only	12	13	7

discussions of the Singapore language environment on the above findings, I nevertheless believe a more accurate portrayal of the language situation amongst students in Singapore is in fact captured in the large-scale Ministry of Education survey carried out in March–May 2010 as shown in Table 2.1 (Ministry of Education 2011).

Table 2.1 depicts a more nuanced language situation which is more realistic and accurate in reflecting Singapore's diverse and complex home language environment. Students were broadly categorised into three main groups based on their dominant language at home: those who spoke predominantly English, those who spoke predominantly MTL (including Chinese, Malay and Tamil languages) and those who spoke both languages just as frequently. The survey shows that 38 % of

Primary 6 Chinese students use predominantly English language at home, which is very close to the 37 % who use predominantly MTL, and the remaining one quarter who uses both EL and CL equally could still be considered a very significant proportion.

Figure 2.1 and Table 2.1 also clearly reflect a unique language scape locally: Chinese Singaporeans, who form about 75 % of the national population, are considerably distanced from the native Chinese environments of China, Hong Kong or Taiwan in language use and exposure. Of course, such a sociolinguistic context is due as much to Singapore's ethnic composition and migrant orientation as it is to Singapore's language and educational policies. From the sociolinguists' viewpoint, the linguistic context, largely dissimilar from native Chinese societies with Chinese as a native language, becomes the basis and reason for Singapore to be seen as a 'language laboratory' with complex linguistic environments. As a multilingual society, the rich interactions and counteractions of languages, the different dialects of various languages become a gold mine for language studies.

With such a sociolinguistic make-up today, Singapore has moved away from the 1900s when Chinese (with its dialects) was used as a first language amongst its Chinese citizens. That said, Singapore is still very different from countries without a Chinese-language environment or Chinese-related historical background or countries where Chinese is studied as a foreign language, such as in Europe or the USA. In reality, with a Chinese environment still in existence, Chinese cultures and traditions still deeply entrenched in daily lives, and the learning of Chinese is still mandatory for Chinese students; the teaching of Chinese in Singapore could not be treated at the level of a foreign language. Moreover, Chinese is a 'mother tongue' that is neither a first language nor a foreign language in Singapore. Singapore cannot be called a society where Chinese is a first language or where Chinese is a foreign language. Chinese language in Singapore should be distinctly positioned in between the levels of first and foreign languages – as a second language – and its teaching and learning be specifically labelled as 'teaching of Chinese as a second language' (TCSL).

By the turn of the Twenty-first Century, Singapore's Chinese-language educators, sociolinguists and education and language policymakers have gradually recognised and affirmed TCSL, though not without a period of transition when many still held on to the former perception of Chinese being the first language for Chinese decedents. A language teaching environment where Chinese is a second language would be increasingly the key to root Singaporean Chinese in their tradition and culture while maintaining a realistic level in the English-dominant sociopolitical macroenvironment.

To keep up with these sociopolitical changes, and to cohere with Singapore's constantly evolving linguistic landscape and Chinese-language teaching environment, Singapore's government began implementing the 'English Language and Mother Tongue' bilingual educational policy in 1979 (Dixon 2005: 625; Goh 1979). This bilingual educational policy, which largely shaped Singapore's educational system, stipulates schools to use English as the medium of instruction for all content

subjects and, at the same time, to teach the three mother tongue languages (Chinese, Malay and Tamil) as stand-alone subjects to the ethnic groups, respectively, regardless of family language (Dixon 2005: 25–26). While scholars have used the term 'English-knowing bilingualism' policy (Ng 2014), the Ministry of Education has described this bilingual educational policy as 'proficiency in English and one other official language' (Pakir 1994: 159) and implemented and refined over the years detailed guidelines involving exposure time, subject-language matching, examinations and attainment requirements (Gopinathan 1998).

Since late 1970s, English has replaced mother tongue languages as the first-language subject and, 'as the common language of instruction, enables all our students to plug into a globalised world' (Ministry of Education 2011: 10). Chinese language, on the other hand, switched from being mainly a first-language subject to a second-language subject. In the last 25 years, Singapore has seen four nationwide Mother Tongue Language Reviews in 1992, 1999, 2004 and 2010. The reason for the Ministry of Education to carry out such large-scale reviews is a direct consequence of the rapid-evolving sociolinguistic trends. The MTL Reviews have nationwide and immense impact on curricular revisions, and they bring about revamp in areas such as lesson content, teaching methods, teaching resources and assessment. To a large extent, the teaching and learning of Chinese in Singapore is directly affected and influenced by these periodic reviews. In the latest MTL Review in 2010, the Mother Tongue Languages Review Committee (MTLRC) has proposed three new goals in its MTL education – the 3 'Cs' of communication, culture and connection. Amongst the three main objectives, the emphasis is on the ability to communicate with others in MTL, which is a most valuable lifelong skill that provides a competitive edge in the child's life and career. Communication was also one of the five learning objectives stipulated by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL 2006), also the objective of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and, of course, one of the key skills in the twenty-first century (The Partnership for 21st Century Learning, P21 2009). In view of the importance of communication for CSL/CL2 students, MTLRC even further recommended to add, besides the conventional skills of listening, spoken, reading and writing, oral and written interaction skills into the curriculum.

Language Acquisition and Learning of Different CL Learners

Singapore's linguistic environment is complex, so even the positioning of Chinese teaching should be at a second-language level and there are a wide range of learners' Chinese-language abilities in schools. This is not the case in many other native Chinese-speaking countries where students are homogeneous in Chinese abilities. In reality, Chinese-language learners in Singapore can further be divided into the following three categories:

1. CNL/CL1 – Chinese as a native language or first language
2. CSL/CL2 – Chinese as a second language
3. CFL – Chinese as a foreign language

In this unique linguistic environment, it is not surprising for one to come across Chinese-language learners from each of these three categories at the same time in the same classroom. In fact, these learners' Chinese-language differences, which include family backgrounds, dominant family language, language exposure and language ability, are so highly evident that one may wonder if they are really raised in the same environment. Such a disparity in Chinese Language abilities can sometimes even be found in one family (when siblings attend different schools and interact with different peers), in a school (where children come from families with different dominant family languages) and even in a classroom (in classes with foreign students who are still required to take up a MTL). In the local classroom, even for CFL learners of different backgrounds, such as a non-Chinese student and a Chinese student from a pure English-speaking background, their learning of Chinese can be different as the latter still has a certain degree of exposure to the Chinese culture (albeit in English) through his or her Chinese parents, grandparents and relatives, while the former has none of such exposure and influence. Because of such great disparity amongst learners, the curricular structure, teaching resources and teaching methods need to have differences amongst individual learners, especially the uniqueness and differentiation amongst learners of Chinese as a second language.

As mentioned, a classroom may even consist of all the three types of Chinese-language learners. The first type of CNL/CL1 students refers to the learners whose mother tongue is Chinese and who are native speakers. These students are in the minority and mainly represented by 'new' immigrants or international students (IS) from China, Taiwan or Malaysia; for instance, the number of PRC students in Singapore schools was estimated to be about 36,000 in 2008 (The Straits Times 2008). Second, there are the CSL/CL2 students who are ethnic Chinese Singaporean students making up the majority of the student population. They converse almost only in English with their peers and only occasionally speak Mandarin. Third, there are also increasing non-Chinese CFL foreign students studying Chinese in mainstream Singapore schools. With the rise of China, Chinese has become the top choice for foreign students in Singapore mainstream schools who are required to take up an additional language subject besides English (Tan 2011).

It would be important for Chinese Language teachers to be aware of and be able to distinguish these learner types, as differentiating them would be the first step to understanding and teaching these learner. Consequently, it is crucial to recognise the most fundamental differences between first-language, second-language and foreign-language learning processes – 'acquisition' and 'learning' (Krashen 1982; Long 1985).

Language is best acquired. Language acquisition refers to the processes by which children naturally grasp their mother tongue. This is mainly the process which CNL/CL1 children acquire Chinese. Language acquisition normally occurs in daily

encounters in the family and community and is mainly an unconscious learning process. It is the mastery of the patterns of a language through great amounts of exposure to the language in social interactions, usually without expert guidance or people correcting the child on purpose. Fundamentally, the process of acquisition does not concentrate on language forms, but focuses on language meanings because language is taken as a whole and internalised. The two oral skills of listening and speaking are not acquired separately from each other but together in daily use. Reading and writing, the two literacy skills, are a different skill set especially with respect to Chinese ideograms that are less tied to their phonetic characteristics in the phonological loop (as compared to English phonics in particular) and hence would still need to be learned in more formal learning settings. Studies have indicated that language acquisition is required, especially before the age of 12–13, in order that a learner gains what is known as a 'native accent' (Scovel 1988; Singleton and Lengyel 1995).

In general, that which is called a 'first language' is mostly gained through the process of language acquisition (Cruz-Ferreira 2011), and most Singaporean children acquired English this way. Only the CNL/CL1 minority who use Chinese as their dominant family language acquired Chinese similarly. The CNL/CL1 learners have the following characteristics in common:

(a) Growing up listening to Chinese from a young age
(b) Beginning to use Chinese to speak after the age of one
(c) Beginning to read in Chinese characters around the age of four
(d) Beginning to write in Chinese characters after entering kindergarten

Such a 'listen-speak-read-write' progression is typical of first-language learners, and they gradually and progressively acquire the four skills naturally (Richards and Rodgers 2014). As CNL/CL1 learners are immersed in the Chinese environment for a long period of time, they receive enormous 'meaningful input', and the repetitiveness and interactivity of such input are extremely high. Hence, even without formal instructions, they can naturally derive and internalise the linguistic rules by making logical connections of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. As CNL/CL1 learners have basically mastered the various aspects of spoken language by the time they enter Primary 1, the curricular and pedagogical foci for them should be literacy skills – reading and writing (Long 1996).

On the other hand, language learning refers to the process of studying a language in a formal learning environment such as a school and with a programme and a goal. Usually taking place in the classroom for CSL/CL2 and CFL learners, Chinese learning requires a teacher's conscious guidance, explanation and correction, with CFL learners requiring even higher degree of guidance. Language learning needs to focus on explicit language forms and meanings and to transform knowledge into thoughts and habits. Teachers have to guide these CSL and CFL students to become aware of their ability to monitor their own language conditions, edit, adjust, check and correct their own speech while speaking, as advocated by Stephen Krashen (1982). Under his monitor hypothesis, second-language learners learn the language better when they are explicitly guided.

Furthermore, CSL and CFL learners' *learning* process differs from the *acquisition* process and can broadly be divided into five stages (Krashen and Terrell 1983):

(a) Stage 1: The 'silent stage'. Learners who come into contact with a completely foreign language would first listen quietly, absorbing and accumulating vocabulary. In the first few days or months during this 'silent' period, the teacher does not need to rigidly require that students speak up, but only needs to provide a large volume of listening materials and exercises.
(b) Stage 2: The 'elementary stage of speaking'. At this stage, students can be asked to imitate or speak in simple phrases or short sentences.
(c) Stage 3: The formal 'spoken language learning stage'. At this stage, students can be asked to say out longer or more complete sentences. Teachers can create opportunities to encourage students to challenge their own speaking ability but need not make it a requirement.
(d) Stage 4: The formal 'reading stage' where reading is introduced via character recognition at the onset, with emphasis on the most commonly used radicals.
(e) Stage 5: The formal 'writing stage' comes later than but is in conjunction with the previous stage of commonly used radical and character recognition and reading.

The learning process as described above still roughly follows the 'silent-listen-speak-read-write' sequence on the whole but is more detailed than the acquisition process. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the first three stages of oral skill development, although many CSL/CL2 students who already have oral language exposure in their daily lives can quickly go through or even bypass Stage 1. However, we notice that the oral skill developmental stages, corresponding to the first three stages, are indeed significant and critical for CSL/CFL learners (Jiang and Cohen 2012) and hence should not be rushed through. Laying down oral foundation is most crucial for the smooth transition from listening and speaking to reading and writing at the later stages, but its importance may be overlooked by teachers who are themselves CNL/CL1 speakers and who have only gone through language acquisition and not language learning themselves. A noticeable trait of many CNL/CL1 teachers is that they hurry through the first three stages, especially the seemingly 'less productive' first and second stages, to jump directly into the later stages, sometimes even combining all the language production, including pronunciation, speaking, reading and writing, together too prematurely.

After Stage 3, differentiated and individualised language teaching would need to begin as proficiency levels become widely varied. If resources do not allow for one-to-one individualised teaching, the number of differentiated teaching activities can be increased year by year: for example, in the first year (e.g. Primary 1 or Secondary 1), 20 % of classroom activities can be differentiated learning activities, i.e. in every lesson hour, about 12 min will be allocated to differentiated instruction, assignments, exercises, etc. In the second year, the proportion of differentiated learning activities can be raised to 25 % and in the third year and thence to 30 %.

It is vital for teachers of CSL/CFL to recognise that as students' abilities improve, the differences amongst individual students will become more pronounced. A commonly used CSL/CFL strategy is to split the class into smaller groups with varying abilities. However, if the class size and lesson type do not permit, the proportion of differentiated instruction with differentiated materials has to be increased; of course, this means more preparatory work for the teachers. By making use of group work and collaborative learning, the small number of students in each group will increase the chances for each student to be engaged and to use the spoken language in their increased interaction.

In conclusion, Chinese Language teachers in Singapore have probably a more difficult task than their counterparts in other countries in that they need to first identify, through diagnosis, the three main student types and consequently employ the corresponding pedagogy to enhance language acquisition and learning. In fact, CNL/CL1 students progress from language acquisition (since young) to language learning (usually in the classroom and on literacy skills when they move on the higher levels of reading and writing), while CSL/CFL students progress from language learning (learning the basics of language in classroom) to language acquisition (usually beyond the classroom and when they are confident and competent to start using CL in real-life situations). The implications of these observations for Chinese Language teachers would be important. For the former, CNL/CL1 teachers can concentrate more on the learning and training of literacy skills of reading and writing of higher-level texts in the classroom, as these CL1 students had mostly already acquired the oral skills in their daily lives and family environment since young. For the latter, teachers need to commence with large amount of listening inputs for these CSL/CFL students before moving to the training of spoken skills, as mentioned in the five stages above. Only with sufficient accumulation of learned input can these students start to make use of them beyond the classroom and acquire even more language knowledge in real-life settings.

Teaching of Chinese Language in Singapore

Due to the complicated linguistic environment of our students, the Ministry of Education has been continuously introducing and fine-tuning the Chinese Language curriculum, by offering more courses customised, in terms of curriculum time, modules, textbooks and even pedagogy, to the needs and abilities of our Chinese-language students.

Just looking at primary school levels alone, the total types of Chinese courses can be as many as four, in increasing level of difficulty to suit the students' Chinese Language proficiency:

(a) Basic Chinese (for Primary 5 and 6): Mainly for students who are foreigners and/or exempted from CL examination requirements
(b) Chinese: For the majority of CSL and CL2 students
(c) Higher Chinese: For students with higher proficiency and aptitude in CL

Table 2.2 Curriculum time for different Chinese courses at primary levels (introduced in 2015)

	Primary 1	Primary 2	Primary 3	Primary 4	Primary 5	Primary 6
(a) Basic Chinese					2.5 h	2.5 h
(b) Chinese	6 h	6 h	4.5 h	4 h	4.5 h	4.5 h
(c) Higher Chinese	7 h	7 h	5.5 h	5 h	5.5 h	5.5 h

Table 2.3 Time allocation for different language skills of different CL courses

	Basic Chinese (%)	Chinese B (CLB) (%)	Chinese (Normal Academic) (%)	Chinese (Express) (%)	Higher Chinese (HCL) (%)
Listening and speaking	65	50	40	35	25
Reading	25	30	30	35	30
Writing	10	20	30	30	45
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Table 2.2 shows that the latest curriculum times for these primary CL courses vary as well, increasing with the difficulty of the course (Ministry of Education 2014).

In addition, primary school Chinese Language curriculum had since the 2004 MTL Review introduced a 'modular approach', which is customised according to the CL2 learners' differentiated backgrounds and abilities. The modular approach stipulated that 70–80 % of curriculum time is to be dedicated to the core module and 20–30 % to either enrichment curriculum or school-based curriculum and also the bridging module for the weaker students (Ministry of Education 2014). This modular system has injected an element of flexibility into the curriculum which allows teachers to adjust the materials and difficulty accordingly, relying even more on customised pedagogy, such as differentiated instructions and differentiated texts (Tan et al. 2009).

The Chinese courses in secondary levels are even more varied, that is, besides the three courses above, there are Chinese Language B (B for basic) and Chinese (Normal Academic), depending on the level of the Chinese Language, as well as the course the student is enrolled in. The times allocated to each of the language skills are different for the different courses, differentiated according to the students' abilities and natures of the courses, as shown in Table 2.3. In fact, the principle of the time allocation fit the different emphases of the students: the higher-ability (HA) students, usually in the Higher Chinese course, have the most time allocated to writing (at 45 %) and the least to listening and speaking (at 25 %); the lower-ability students, usually in the Basic Chinese course, have the most time allocated to listening and speaking (at a very high 65 %) and the least time to writing (only at 10 %) (Ministry of Education 2010).

Now, with a better understanding of the CL curriculum and student profiles in Singapore, we shall now turn our focus to the teaching of Chinese to the largest group of local students – the CSL/CL2 learners. The ultimate aim of CSL/CL2 teaching is not only to teach the language and the many specificities within its

knowledge domain but also to nurture the students' interest in learning and subsequently in using Chinese.

To achieve this ultimate aim, teachers need to first understand and then to make best use of the multilingual environment to sustain the CSL/CL2 students' interest and use of Chinese Language. This can be described in terms of the four key skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing:

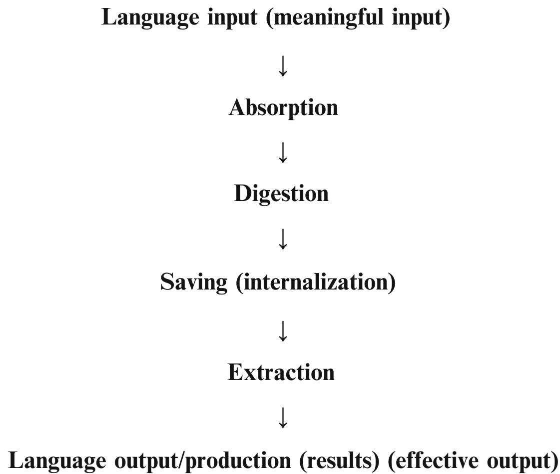
(a) Listening: In terms of easy access of CL listening resources and opportunities, there actually exists a 24/7 environment in multilingual Singapore with at least four Chinese Language radio stations, two free-to-air Chinese Language TV channels and countless real-life situations. Without much effort and inconvenience, CSL/CL2 students can listen to quality Chinese spoken language from mass media, daily encounters or even Chinese-speaking friends and relatives.
(b) Speaking: CSL/CL2 students usually do not have many opportunities to use Chinese in their social environment with their family members and especially with their peers who are mostly English speaking. However, more often than not, speaking in Chinese Language with a Chinese-conversant person can actually be a conscious choice they can make. In the larger environment of Singapore society, these students could speak to many of their Chinese Language teachers and staff, canteen operators, shop owners, sales persons, transport personnel, man on the street, neighbours, relatives especially grandparents and CNL/CL1 classmates. These Chinese Language speakers are very important resources that can be tapped into by the teachers to advocate learning beyond classroom. A commonly used and highly effective method to tap on these external resources is task-based language teaching (TBLT; Long 2000; Gass and Varonis 1985), which utilises authentic language to do meaningful tasks, sometimes even in real-life situations, using the target language.
(c) Reading: Authentic Chinese reading materials, though not as prevalent as English sources, are in fact quite easily available in the local context, such as the newspapers, magazines, signboards, road signs, advertisements, notices, etc. It is a matter of raising awareness and rendering these materials meaningful by teachers' instructions or through TBLT strategies. Parents too, can consciously guide their child in engaging Chinese materials to increase the chance for CSL/CL2 children to read Chinese before entering preschool.
(d) Writing: Writing is almost certainly the least used skill amongst the four skills. Besides school work, CSL/CL2 children usually do not have the opportunity and interest to write in Chinese. Furthermore, with the progression of technology, including keyboarding and voice-to-text input methods, it will become even rarer for children to write in Chinese. Using Chinese writing in an interactive and authentic manner, such as note-writing and interactive letter-writing, will encourage children to use the language even after their schooling years. Besides the more conventional understanding of the concept of 'writing', which usually means the handwriting of Chinese character, we can further expand the concept of 'writing' to include all forms of production of Chinese characters and expressions. This means that 'writing' will include handwriting, typing, optical recog-

> nition input, voice-to-text input, etc., as long as Chinese characters and expressions are produced as an end product. While I certainly do not advocate the elimination of handwriting practices and learning, I believe we have to recognise the undeniable progression to an era whereby ICT-assisted and ICT-oriented input becomes even more ubiquitous. ICT-assisted input will be a skill which our students need to learn and develop, so as to encourage them to be even more willing to produce Chinese texts in their daily lives. And the good news is that ICT-assisted input will undoubtedly become even more effortless and convenient with the advancement of technology and even artificial intelligence.

From the above observations, it is palpable that Singapore's second-language learners have too few opportunities to be exposed to Chinese, especially before entering school. However, it also shows that there are ample and easily available Chinese Language materials in their living surroundings if teachers and parents help them make the conscious choice to be engaged with Chinese. To make up for this lack of exposure and engagement, the CSL/CL2 students need a curriculum with an even more rigorous and systematic structure as well as more curriculum time to develop their four language skills.

In primary school, Singaporean students only spend about 20 % of their curriculum time learning Chinese, as all other subjects are taught in English and take up most of the curricular time. Hence, teachers need to help the students overcome this time constraint by extending their learning beyond curriculum time and the classroom, possibly through pedagogy such as TBLT and 'seamless learning' or what is called in-and-out-of-classroom learning (Wong et al. 2010). We can take reference from the St. Lambert bilingual immersion programme, first aimed to develop bilinguals in St. Lambert, Canada, in 1965. Their Early Total Immersion Programme, which started with 100 % immersion in the second language at early infant stage, was the most popular entry level programme (Baker and Jones 1998: 496). For preschoolers in the Singapore context which is dominated by the English language, teachers and curriculum specialists should even more seriously consider increasing curriculum time for CL from the current 40 % for the majority of preschools, to as high as 100 % for preschools with children with little or no Chinese Language exposure. According to the St. Lambert's bilingual immersion programme, the 100 % second-language immersion can last for 2–3 years, before reducing to 80 % for another 3–4 years and finally to 50 % during the junior school period. It is crucial to note that CSL/CL2 learners are unable to benefit from a curriculum that is designed for CNL/CL1 learners, and hence CSL/CL2 teachers need to design more targeted, selective and systematic pedagogy based on language learning theories.

Several theories about language learning, such as the input hypothesis (Krashen 1985), the language processing hypothesis (Bialystok 1991; McLaughlin 1983; Schmidt and Lee 2005), the associative learning theory (Ellis 2005; Gasser 1990) and the processing instruction theory (van Pattern 2003), have all raised the point that when learning a language, whether it is being studied as a first or second language, one process is similar. This process simplifies and models the 'input-output' language learning flow:



The actual language teaching-learning process is much more complex than this flow chart shows. However, this model is still accurate and realistic in general. First, we can define 'input' as listening and reading and 'output' as speaking and writing. Regardless of whether learners are learning Chinese as a first or second language, they need to first receive sufficiently large volumes of 'input' of the target language. It is worthwhile for teachers to note that the materials to form the 'input' usually meet three broad criteria:

(a) Meaningfulness
(b) Structured
(c) Recurrence

After repeated 'meaningful input', learners can gradually digest the materials and convert these contents as mental lexicon, i.e. to save lexicon, vocabularies, semantics and syntax into their cognitive corpus. Eventually, these information (including character forms, words and sentence structures) will be internalised into the learners' linguistic systems for the learners to be able to draw upon whenever required and to create 'output' in the form of speech or writing. We can then term this as 'effective output' (as it achieves effective communication and message delivery).

Aligned with second-language learning theories (McLaughlin 1983; Schmidt and Lee 2005), the Chinese-language teaching in lower primary (Primary 1 and 2) should also model the 'input-output' language learning flow and be more concentrated on teaching the skills of listening and speaking. The second-language learners at this level need to be fed a sufficiently large volume of meaningful spoken Chinese materials (meaningful input) that they can easily comprehend, preferably authentic materials that are easily available in their surroundings. Only then will they be able to use Chinese to communicate in situations of daily social interactions and later, and to create meaningful, understandable messages or effective output. In addition, it is further argued that it is more important for students to first grasp the

skills of speaking and listening, instead of learning the official Chinese phonetic system of Hanyu Pinyin. The present writer's view is that this is because Hanyu Pinyin will only provide limited help in reading as it is only an intermediary tool or an additional agent (and not the Chinese character itself), and it cannot effectively enable learners with the most pressing communication need of daily life: the listening and speaking skills that are essential in social interactions.

While there are many pedagogies that can be applied based on differentiated instruction, one vital CSL/CL2 pedagogy which is in line with the research on second-language acquisition is collaborative learning (CoL) where learners learn together and progress towards knowledge equivalence prior to, during and subsequent to CoL (Weinberger et al. 2007). Members within the collaborative group become similar with respect to their knowledge and acquired mutually improved understanding of the topic concerned. CoL is an especially important teaching and learning strategy for CSL/CL2 learners as the learners' active interactions in the target language with other learners provide a critical learning process: the negotiation of meaning. Only in these authentic interactions will the teaching and target language become meaningful and thereby internalised. Not only are ideas and language skills externalised amongst peers, the positive influence, motivation and peer correction are crucial in nurturing their interest in the Chinese Language.

Generally speaking, students with different starting points require differentiated and specifically designed curricula. For learners of a foreign language, and even learners of the language as a second language, who begin from a lower level, they need to begin with a curriculum with the primary foci of listening and speaking. I have briefly described the differences between first- and second-language learning processes versus foreign-language learning processes above, but in principle, both share certain similarities in language learning. Understanding student differences is paramount for teachers to avoid using course material and methods for first-language learners to teach second-language learners or to use second-language materials and methods to teach first-language learners. And identifying student similarities enable teachers to group the similar ones together to use appropriate teaching methods for the same group of students, who are of similar linguistic abilities. Such grouping techniques need to be differentiated according to the needs and inclinations of students in specific classroom settings and based on pedagogical goals. For instance, CNL/CL1 or higher-ability (HA) students, CSL/CL2 or middle-ability (MA) students and CFL or lower-ability (LA) students could be grouped separately and accordingly to their specific language skills, and differentiated materials and instructions could be given to each of the groups with different teaching outcomes. In other instances, grouping of students with mixed abilities could also be employed at times, so as to encourage peer learning and sharing, such as for the HA students to guide and help the LA students. In yet other instances, students could also be grouped according to their learning styles, such as those of different modalities, that is, whether if they are visual, aural, read/write and kinesthetic learners, and content inputs and learning process could be adjusted accordingly.

On the whole, the fundamental principles of language mastery, whether they are for first-language, second-language or foreign-language mastery, share many

similarities. However, in terms of language teaching theory, curricular framework, curriculum content, lesson plans, teaching methods, learning strategies, etc., there are still fundamental differences amongst the teaching of a language as a first, second or foreign language. The teacher's ability to incorporate fundamentally differential teaching strategies for first- and second-language learners will be crucial, and their inability to adopt suitable teaching strategies will affect the teaching effectiveness. Especially from a learning point of view, successful language teaching means that the student has learned the skills to actually use the language comfortably. For the Singaporean learners of Chinese as a second language, becoming 'active learners' and 'proficient users' has been the ultimate goal of the mother tongue language policy (Ministry of Education 2011: 17).

Conclusion

In conclusion, with the changing family language trends and student backgrounds, most students in Singapore would learn Chinese at the second-language level. It is especially crucial for Chinese-language teachers educated in their first-language environment, or in China and Taiwan contexts, to adapt, retrain and carry out the teaching of Chinese as a second language. Moreover, educational and curricular planning will need to fully make use of the unique linguistic, cultural, and environmental advantages in the teaching of Chinese language. Meanwhile, there is a need to continue revamping the present curriculum framework which has been more inclined towards first language in the past and consider the perspectives of second-language learning and the fast-evolving family language environments.

If the above suggestions could be made possible by concerted efforts amongst parents, educators and policymakers, the students can still master Chinese in conditions where they learn it as a second language. Course milestones, teaching resources, teaching methods and assessment would need to be revised in the process, but not necessarily at the cost of lowering expectations. Instead, changing the direction and focus of Chinese-language teaching in Singapore and utilising second-language pedagogies and more effective and appealing learning tools are important measures. It is imperative that these changes have language acquisition theory as their foundation. There is a need to conduct research on teaching methods for Chinese as a second language as their strategic basis. These changes need be always in the forefront view of language planning officers, and in-service teachers. These are the most important changes to the Chinese-language teaching that will nurture, grow and improve the Chinese of all Singaporean students.

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