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Heritage Language Teaching and Learning through a Macro-Approach

Heritage Language Teaching and Learning through a Macro-Approach

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Researchers have argued that macro-approaches to heritage language (HL) teaching that take into account heritage language learners' (HLLs) global knowledge of the HL are particularly effective; such macro-approaches are often characterized as discourse-based, content-based, genre-based, task-based, or experiential (Kagan & Dillon, 2001, 2008, 2009). This paper describes a set of Mandarin HL curriculum and instructional methods that utilized the notion of macro-approaches to teach secondary students in a STARTALK summer program in 2009. The curriculum built on learners' prior strengths in speaking and listening to improve their writing and reading abilities and validated their hybrid identities as Chinese Americans. Class topics included the Chinese Exclusion Act and Chinese immigration, history and personal memories of Chinatown, intergenerational relationships, personal border-crossing experiences, and pop music in Mandarin-speaking regions. A class blog was used to further enhance HLLs' motivation and language production. Through the camp, students eventually took active ownership of their learning, dispelling the image of adolescent heritage language learners as lacking motivation to learn about their cultural roots and heritage languages, as portrayed in the literature. It is hoped that this paper will initiate more interest in developing research-based HL curricula and pedagogies.

Introduction

Heritage language (HL) education has gained much ground in U.S. research and policy since the 1990s when the critical need for Americans to be competent in languages other than English was increasingly recognized (Brecht & Ingold, 1998). After the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, a lack of competent Arabic linguists in the national intelligence community prompted the U.S. government to reexamine its language policy and support towards foreign language learning. As a result, the National Language Security Initiative (NLSI) was established in 2006 to encourage the learning and teaching of languages that are defined as languages

spoken in geographic regions that are of economic, political, and military interest to the U.S. government (Powell & Lowenkron, 2006). At the onset of NLSI, much attention was placed on the teaching and learning of heritage languages, which are identified as readily available linguistic resources (McGinnis, 2008; National Foreign Language Center, 2009; Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001; STARTALK, n.d.). Mandarin, as a language widely spoken among immigrant communities from China and Taiwan, has garnered much attention since China and Taiwan are of economic, political and military strategic interest to the US. However, as an emerging field, nearly every aspect of HL education awaits research, and curriculum and materials development is often identified as one of the most pressing issues for HL education (Kagan & Dillon, 2008). Guadalupe Valdés, a strong advocate of HL education in the US, noted in 2000 that “the pedagogies and practices currently used for teaching heritage languages are essentially atheoretical” (2000b, p. 389).

As of 2010, although growing research has been and is currently conducted to advance our understanding of HL learners (e.g., their motivation, their lived experience, their language uses, etc.), there is still a paucity in research-based instructional methods and curricula that address their special needs and enhance their linguistic and cultural knowledge in their respective HLs. As a parameter for the heritage language learner, Kagan and Dillon (2009) coined the term *global knowledge* in reference to the macro-instructional approaches that take into account heritage language learners’ (HLLs) general but “imperfect and incomplete knowledge of the heritage language” (p. 164). This paper shares how we, as Mandarin HL instructors, drew from heritage language research and Asian American literature and developed a curriculum that both takes into account our HL students’ experience of growing up bilingual and bicultural in the US and capitalizes on their global knowledge in their HL. The paper also documents students’ response to the curriculum that we implemented in a STARTALK summer class in 2009. It is hoped that this paper will initiate more interest in developing research-based HL curricula and pedagogies.

What We Knew about Our HLLs before Going in

Many scholars have worked to define HLLs (e.g., Fishman, 2001; Hornberger & Wang, 2008; Kondo-Brown & Brown, 2007; Valdés, 2000a). One of the most widely cited definitions comes from Valdés (2000a), who describes HLLs as “individuals raised in homes where a language other than English is spoken and who are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language” (p. 35). Since HL acquisition begins in the home and in most cases, does not continue to develop at school, HLLs often have stronger listening and speaking skills in interpersonal modes, especially in close personal contact, while they lack functional literacy skills or the skills fostered in formal schooling that would help them function in a professional setting (Valdés, 1995; Wiley, 2008; S. Wu, 2007). More recently, Hornberger and Wang (2008) define HLLs as “individuals with familial or ancestral ties to a language other than English who exert their agency in determining if they are HLLs of that language” (p. 6). Hornberger and Wang place HLLs in an ecological system in which their language learning and use both shape and are shaped by

their self perceptions, positioning, and interactions with various people and institutions under larger sociopolitical and historical influences.

Hornberger and Wang (2008) foreground HLLs' sociocultural experiences and highlight the need to understand how HLLs negotiate identities and language use during their contact with dominant/local ideologies, dominant/heritage cultures, and standard/dialect language forms because they do not use two languages in isolation. For many HLLs, learners of Mandarin and Cantonese in particular, their HL learning often takes place at weekend schools as early as kindergarden and extends well into the 12th grade. School hours range from half to a full-day of language classes and cultural activities. Teachers at weekend Chinese schools are typically parents who draw on their own experiences learning Chinese as a first language. They are rarely teachers by profession and often work in unrelated fields. The curriculum and textbooks used in Chinese schools are often textbooks imported from China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong, approved by governmental or private foundations for use with heritage language learners. These textbooks, however, often contain content that fails to reflect the social cultural experiences of Chinese heritage students residing in the US (Li, 2005; P. Liu, 2006; Lu, 2001).

The work of Asian American writers and researchers has revealed that their HL learning experiences at weekend schools were often forced upon them. Lu (2001) discusses how first-generation immigrants view the attendance of weekend Chinese school as a way to retain linguistic connections and contact with the Chinese immigrant community. Second-generation Chinese American students, however, describe attending weekend Chinese schools as a negative learning experience that was disconnected from any educational experience in a regular K-12 U.S. classroom. These negative experiences attending weekend Chinese school are the main catalyst driving heritage language learners away from claiming Chinese as a heritage language and culture that has a positive influence in their lives (Kibria, 2002; E. Liu, 1998; Tse, 2000; Tung, 2000; Wiley, 2008; Wu, 2002). Researchers (e.g., Li, 2005; P. Liu, 2006; Lu, 2001) examining Mandarin as a heritage language in weekend language schools have also uncovered ineffective learning of Mandarin by HLLs, which could be accounted for by low motivation of the learners to learn about their heritages, a lack of suitable curriculum and appropriately trained teachers, and generational conflicts. A study conducted by Ping Liu (2006) shows that students may spend years attending a weekend Chinese language school yet remain unable to speak or write Chinese (E. Liu, 1998). To conclude, HL research and Asian American narratives point to the urgent need for developing HL curricula that attend to an array of issues surrounding HL language and teaching, including HLLs' proficiency, sociocultural experiences, and negotiated identities as they move between home and school.

Curriculum Development and Pedagogy Suggested by HL Researchers

Some HL researchers and practitioners have suggested ways to develop HL materials and instructional approaches, although their effectiveness has not yet been determined by sufficient data. Top-down- or macro-approaches that build on HLLs' strengths in speaking and listening and their global knowledge in the HL are among the most commonly discussed (Kagan & Dillon, 2001, 2008, 2009; Lynch, 2003; Roca & Colombi, 2003). Generally speaking, macro-approaches often start with content

that is age-appropriate or academically challenging to provide HLLs, who need special work on pragmatics and stylistics, with extensive practice in HLs in as many modes and registers as possible (Roca & Columbi, 2003). In other words, macro-approaches seek to help HLLs develop their grammatical and lexical knowledge through discourse-level or genre-based activities. By contrast, micro-approaches isolate language elements based on their complexity and build learners' competency from the bottom-up, that is, moving from the simple to the complex. Such approaches that emphasize metalinguistic rules and discrete grammatical activities appear to do little to help HLLs, because unlike foreign language learners, HLLs often receive no meta language of instruction in their HL and thus find grammatical explanations illogical and incomprehensible (Kagan & Dillon, 2001). Table 1 illustrates some instructional features of macro- and micro-approaches.

Approaches that are characterized as experiential are also macro-approaches. Lee and Kim (2007) further note that classroom practices that position heritage languages and cultures as enriching experiences in American society improve HLLs' motivation and mutual respect. In a similar vein, Kagan and Dillon (2009) differentiate HL teaching from foreign language teaching and contend that HL teachers should provide students with extensive HL linguistic exposure in both the immigrant community and the home country (ibid.). As a result, Kagan and Dillon define a successful HL teacher as someone who knows the culture of the country of origin as well as the HL community and its unique culture. By implication, a successful HLL is someone with knowledge of the target country and his/her community of residence. Finally, the use of internet-based interactive technology is also encouraged by some HL researchers (e.g., Wang, 2004) to enhance HL production and learner motivation.

Table 1
Micro-approaches for non-HLLs versus macro-approaches for HLLs

Teaching Domains	Micro-approaches	Macro-approaches
Vocabulary	Full range	Age-appropriate/literary/academic/formal
Reading	Small texts, gradually and slowly increasing in volume and complexity	Fairly large and complex texts almost from the beginning
Writing	Sentence level, gradually advancing to paragraph level	Emphasis on the content and gradually improve spelling, grammar, and stylistics
Speaking	Initially restricted to dialogue, gradually progressing to monologue and discussion	Emphasis on monologue and discussion
Listening	Short simple texts, gradually increasing in volume and complexity	Full range of native language input (i.e., movies, documentaries, lectures)
Culture	Initially isolated and decontextualized cultural items of which learners have very limited experience	Full range of language input (e.g., audio, visual, and print) that contain pertinent cultural information

Note. Adapted from Kagan & Dillon (2001, p. 513)

About the Focal HLLs and the HL Class

The focal Mandarin HL class was an intensive two-week STARTALK summer camp for secondary students funded by the NLSI. All 13 students had experiences attending weekend schools and their family members spoke a wide range of Chinese varieties, including Mandarin, Cantonese, Taiwanese and Shanghainese. Students also showed different preferences for either traditional and simplified Chinese characters. Eight of the students identified themselves as being forced by parents to attend the camp and the rest of students identified themselves as neither excited nor motivated to attend the camp. They viewed summer camp as an activity to pass time and also rationalized that a fee of \$100 for this two-week summer camp was well worth the cost. When asked to set personal goals for their learning at the camp, most students hoped to improve their language skills, especially in speaking, as well as their understanding of Chinese culture. The authors of the paper co-designed and co-taught this heritage class. We are both doctoral students in language education and we have tried to bring in theories of heritage language education to our lessons and teaching.

How We Developed and Implemented a Research-Based Curriculum

The curriculum designed for this class was anchored by two theoretical underpinnings. First, based on Lee and Kim's (2007) findings that stress heritage languages and cultures as part of the American cultural experience, we decided to engage students with academically challenging content that centered on both historic and contemporary Chinese American experiences. Secondly, following Kagan and Dillon's (2001, 2008, 2009) recommendation that curriculum developers consider the global knowledge of HLLs, we designed classroom tasks that capitalized on the HLLs' strengths in English and the HL.

Our goals for the students during the camp were that they learn to tell their stories, to record their life and to discuss their thoughts in Mandarin. We constructed the class around students' lived experiences with the hope that by doing so, we could motivate them to learn their HL. Moreover, we extended classroom interaction to the Internet by creating a class blog on Google. On a daily basis, students needed to respond to at least one of the questions that teachers posed during the class and at least three other posts by their classmates on the blog in Chinese, in either traditional or simplified characters. Since students came from different backgrounds in their knowledge of traditional or simplified Chinese characters, we tried not to discourage any of them by including both uses as much as we could (see Figure 1 for teachers' expectations written in both characters), and explicitly encouraged students to expand their reading and writing repertoires by learning from one another. After all, as Valdés (2000b) suggests, effective HL instruction builds on HLLs' existing knowledge rather than stigmatizing it: HL teaching is about "expand(ing) the bilingual range (of the HLLs)" (p. 388). Recognizing the presence of code-switching and mixing among bilinguals (Raschka, Wei, & Lee, 2002), we made it clear to the students that we allowed some level of English in their output but would not like to see it dominated by English. We also focused more on the ability to type in Chinese on the computer than that to handwrite Chinese characters because of the growing

importance of computer literacy (Haneda, 2005; S. Wu, 2007) in the current modernized world. Below is a detailed description of topics covered in the curriculum and instructional approaches around them. Students' responses are also included in the description whenever relevant.

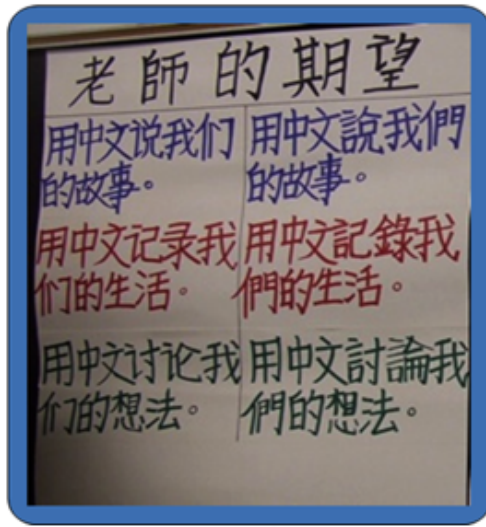


Figure 1. Teachers' expectations written in traditional and simplified characters

The Chinese Exclusion Act and Chinese immigration

Students were required to do some online research (in English) on the history of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and its total repeal in 1965 to assist their understanding of this topic (Haneda, 2005). Both teachers then acted out a short play in Mandarin about experiences of the first Chinese immigrants and their contributions to the transcontinental railroad during the class as a way of introducing relevant Mandarin vocabulary and sentence structures. Many students asked complex questions about why Chinese people immigrated and what types of jobs they did after their arrival. This topic seemed to arouse many students' curiosity because some noted that they did not learn this part of history in their official school curriculum. A post-class activity enabled students to delve into the reasons why their families immigrated to the US and to build a chronicle record of their own family immigration history.

History and personal experiences of Chinatowns

Again, students were asked to do online research on the origin of Chinatowns across the US before class officially began. They were also given English texts written by Chinese American writers that depicted their experiences or memories of Chinatowns (e.g., some excerpts from Eric Liu's (1999) book *The Accidental Asian* and short articles composed by Asian American high school students from the edited book *Yell-Oh Girls* (Nam, 2001). During the class, the translated Chinese texts were used to familiarize students with the language elements that would

help them to talk about their own experiences of Chinatowns or Chinese grocery stores. Flip-cameras were utilized to record students' oral presentations, during which they talked about pirate DVDs/bags, bubble tea, a variety of tasty pastry, roasted duck, exotic fish in aquariums, smelly and crowded streets, etc. On the class blog, students were asked to write down their understanding of the origins of Chinatowns and their personal experiences of Chinatowns. Some students wrote that the existence of Chinatowns reflected the tendency that people of the same origin and culture stayed together when they arrived in a new environment and that was why there were also Italian or Korean towns. Some argued that Chinatowns emerged because of segregation and discrimination against Chinese people during a period of time when the Chinese people looked and spoke differently from the rest of Americans. A post-class activity invited students to collaboratively design a "Great Mall of China" of their own.

Intergenerational relationships and family language policies

During one class, students were divided into three groups, one representing parents, another representing children, and the other serving as judges. Groups of "parents" and "children" debated on various issues using the sentence structures and vocabulary items designated by the teachers. Students' output was evaluated based on the number of targeted sentence structures and vocabulary items used in their arguments as well as their persuasiveness. Each sentence structure was worth five points and each vocabulary item was worth one point. One student from the parents' group would start the game by sharing his/her ideas in Mandarin and another student from the children's group continued by either refuting the parent's view or bringing in new perspectives. The game then went back and forth between the two groups until each group member spoke at least twice. Discussion within the group was also encouraged so that output would include the most convincing arguments with maximum, targeted language elements. In addition, group discussion further prepared the less orally proficient students to speak in front of their peers and teachers. The judges' group used a worksheet containing target sentence structures and vocabulary items to assist them in keeping a record of the scores that each team gained. And eventually along with rubrics rating rationalization and persuasiveness of each team, a result would be determined by the co-teachers and the judge team. This activity aimed to provide students with a forum to develop their argumentative ability in Mandarin.

Topics at issue included whether there was a need for children to learn Mandarin in the US, whether children should date non-Chinese or non-Asians, whether children should spend \$200 on their graduation gowns, etc. As topics changed, different groups also took different roles so that all groups had the opportunity to act as parents, children, or judges. Students hotly debated what it meant to be Chinese, American, or Chinese American and how proficiency in a language played an important role in developing a sense of self. Students' arguments provided teachers with important insights into their struggles as adolescents; and through explicit talk about the role of different languages in their lives, students also developed a more highlighted awareness of their learning of Mandarin. On the class blog, students further shared their thoughts on aspects of

their lives they did not think their parents understood and commented on each other's posts. When given a platform to express themselves, the HLLs were able to provide important descriptions of their lived experiences as young adolescents, and such information was critical as it further helped teachers to design materials relevant to HLLs' concerns and experiences.

Chinese American experiences

Students were instructed to share personal as well as family border-crossing experiences by talking about artifacts or personal items that represented the family or themselves. Teachers first modeled presentations of this kind and then directed students' attention to the language elements necessary for their own presentations. Through talking about the artifacts meaningful to them, students learned to express themselves in Mandarin and connected this with a facet of life relevant to them. Items that students shared included, for example, a Chinese brush made of a student's baby hair (it is a common practice for parents of newborns in Mandarin-speaking regions to take their newborns' hair to make Chinese brushes), a hand-made blanket that had been passed down to the student from her grandmother and would be passed down to her child in the future, a bracelet of a student's Chinese zodiac animal that an uncle in Taiwan gave her, a tennis ball of a student whose favorite tennis player was Michael Chang, a wooden gun that a student had practiced with in the honor guard. The artifacts that students brought into the class not only helped students reflect deeply on their own identities but also enabled teachers to understand how their identities were constructed through various cultural elements from traditionally Chinese or American social contexts. The blending of two cultures through the sharing of personal stories exemplified the unique cultural discourse that exemplified Chinese American experiences.

Pop music in Mandarin-speaking regions

Mandarin pop music was utilized to expose HLLs to a full range of native linguistic and cultural input. Recognizing that weekend schools tend to teach canonical Chinese culture that often fails to capture the dynamics of language use in modern society, we drew from pop music in Mandarin-speaking regions to help students develop understanding of the practices, perspectives, and products of the Chinese culture (see Standards 2.1 & 2.2 in American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, 1996). Special attention was given to music by pop singers who were also American-born because they could serve as role models for our HLLs, showing them that high proficiency in the HL is possible and knowing one's heritage culture and language enriches one's life. Additionally, linguistic elements in the lyrics were integrated as key vocabulary and phrases for class, and song melodies were recycled in lyric rewriting exercises. Parts of the original lyrics were deleted so that students could write their own words in Mandarin. Since some English was permitted during the lyrics re-writing exercises, students' final products often showed some code-switching between Mandarin and English, a very common practice in the contemporary pop music in Mandarin-speaking regions. During the break, students actively sang the songs they had adapted. They also voluntarily explored YouTube after the class to look

for Mandarin pop songs they could share among themselves. Moreover, a few students even adapted English lyrics by a well-known American hip hop group (Black Eyed Peas) into Mandarin. As students experimented with Mandarin in English pop music, they also brought their border-crossing experiences to life.

Conclusions

The macro-approach curriculum and instructional practices used for this class took into account the HLLs' experiences as Chinese Americans and their global knowledge in Mandarin. Although the efficiency of macro-approaches awaits empirical examination, it seems to at least raise student levels of motivation to learn Mandarin and enhances their participation. Almost all of the focal HLLs noted their intention to return to camp the following year. Some students further commented that this was because they felt more connected to the reading materials and topics discussed in this class than those they encountered at the weekend schools. It also seems that when HLLs' language learning was facilitated by content-knowledge learning, their motivation to learn was enhanced as well.

It was also beyond both teachers' expectations that these HLLs, who first identified themselves as uninterested in learning Mandarin, eventually took ownership of their learning and created a sense of community among themselves. The focal HLLs were not only actively engaged with each other in the HL class but also outside the class on the class blog or Facebook. Although it was not surprising to see students' posts on the class blog in Chinese characters, it was impressive to find out that some of their communication on Facebook was in Pinyin (a Romanized system for Mandarin), suggesting that they used it as a form of intra-group communication. This sense of community among young adolescent HLLs might be critical for them in maintaining their HLs, when their social life starts to move from family to friends. It also suggests that internet-based interactive practices might be utilized to help HLLs create a sense of community.

In sum, both teachers learned the need for teachers to acknowledge HLLs' hybrid identities and language uses. We strove to design a curriculum that would take into account their lived experiences and needs. Macro-approaches provide such a framework for teachers working with HLLs. Although the curriculum and teaching practices shared here were originally designed for a two-week intensive Mandarin summer camp, the concept can be adapted to teaching other heritage languages during school hours. While the actual effectiveness of the curriculum on students' language proficiency requires further assessment, it is hoped that this paper will initiate more interest in research-based HL curricula and pedagogies.

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