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Optimizing the Process of Basic Modern Chinese Teaching and Proficiency Tests for Adults in Sinological Glottodidactics in the Polish Language Environment

Abstract

The sinological studies in Poland and the Chinese language teaching have a long tradition. Due to the growing interest in Chine, the increasing need for the Chinese language competences has to be outlined. The teachers' attention to teaching process is expected to be consistent with the level-specific curriculum, both for the teaching and testing language proficiency. Thus, fallowing the experience of commonly taught languages in Europe, the European standards derived from *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment* (2001) have become the base for the framework of teaching and assessing Chinese language competences on the basic level A1 and A2.

Keywords: CEFR, teaching Chinese, level-specific curriculum, planning the teaching process

The sinological studies and the teaching of Chinese carried out at the University of Warsaw have a long tradition that goes back to the 1930s and has contributed to the broad perspective of the European and worldwide studies of the Chinese philosophy, classics, tradition, literature, culture, language and society. Having neared the end of the 20th century, the hitherto practice in glottodidactics – frequently referred to as the teaching of rare languages – had to face the challenge of the expansion of teaching Chinese beyond the experienced academic centres. As a consequence, the Chinese linguistics in Poland has turned towards applied linguistics.

CEFR as a language teaching standard in Europe

Following three decades of expert works in the field, the Council of Europe released the final version of the official document titled *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (abbreviated further as CEFR). The book is intended for people involved in organizing and programming language teaching process in the broad sense of the term as well as for language learners undergoing the process. Going far beyond the matters concerning the teaching and learning process, the publication starts a discussion about providing instructions with regard to less-commonly taught languages in Europe (ESOKJ[1] 2003:5,7-8, Komorowska 2003:74–75, Martyniuk 2007:63). The publication neither determines nor restricts the teaching activities; rather than that, it offers a mode of categorization to be used for describing the teaching process from both teacher's and learner's perspectives.

The CEFR refers to and comes out of the plurilingualism and pluriculturalism of the communities in Europe, where language education means not only a second language instruction but, first of all, the development of communicative competence in the pluricultural context. Thanks to numerous experts and their long-term practice, *the languages that are commonly taught in Europe* have been taught in line with appropriately prepared courses and proficiency tests carried out within properly distinguished language levels, while courses in less-commonly taught languages have been offered without clear-cut criteria regarding the levels and scope of teaching programs.

CEFR – a new context for teaching Chinese

The growing interest in Modern Chinese in Europe is a consequence of the economic development we have recently been witnessing in China. Parallel to the call for standardized language instructions in Europe, the demand to certify language competence according to the levels being taught increases as well. The CEFR points to a substantial value of the objectives and the obvious socio-cultural dimension of language education. Communicative language competences consisting of the linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic components, namely knowledge, skills and know-how, sensitivity to social conventions, mastery of discourse, cohesion and coherence, as well as of language activities and strategies to interact through reception and production are described systematically and from a holistic perspective (CEFR 2001:13–14). Therefore the CEFR is regarded as a proper tool to optimise the process of Modern Chinese teaching and proficiency tests. The CEFR offers the A (basic) to C (proficiency) levels objectives and assumptions to be described in a way adequate for the corresponding curricula and to be applied

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[1] Polish edition of *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, (2001).

gradually and effectively within any programmed language course in the range of the given level. Yet the CEFR offers a subdivision of the level if it is justified in the scheme of the curriculum. The scope of the given level should never refer to the particular educational context (CEFR 2001:33–36). Regarded as a document "of crucial importance for language education throughout the European Union … [it] sets new standards in developing foreign language teaching curricula" (Szczepaniak-Kozak 2005:290). In addition to descriptors, the CEFR uses action-oriented approach to outline the priority goals in language (Martyniuk 2007:64). Since the communication is an act performed by a person embedded in a certain context of everyday life in a community, the CEFR treats each of such acts as a descriptor rooted in the situation, purpose, task and theme. The individual, social and cultural conditions make learner persist constantly in language competence development (CEFR 2001:9, 45). The CEFR does not promote any teaching method, thus being able to meet the requirements of any mode of language teaching. It is highly appreciable that the CEFR "has adopted the principle of the non-evaluative attitude to language teaching. It means that any teaching method, any in-class technique and any final choice as to the purpose or content of teaching is considered on equal basis" (Komorowska 2003:77).

Along with the experience in teaching and research in language acquisition and cognition, the CEFR seems to be a starting point to render the levels distinguishable and explicit both for the practice of teaching and for the proficiency certifying within the wide range of language teaching policies. The teacher's intuitional attempts to adapt and revise a language course can be useful and sufficient in its local dimension. To make language testing and certifying reliable, the course levels and testing curricula have to comply with the European standardisation. Therefore the qualitative and quantitative method applied to scale proficiency levels of language competence can invest them with reliability in the certain research context, especially with regard to teaching, measurement and research group. Quantitative analysis, however, is a theoretical and steady process and only under that condition can it contribute to reliability estimation (CEFR 2001:21–22). "Its [CEFR] proper role is to encourage all those involved as partners in a language learning / teaching process to state as explicitly and transparently as possible their own theoretical basis and their practical procedures. In order to fulfil this role it sets out parameters, categories, criteria and scales" (CEFR 2001:18); it offers the perspective of language teaching theory and practice, as well as of language acquisition, that is oriented towards new solutions, without preference of any particular ones over others.

Planning the teaching process

In the new millennium, planning the teaching process in Poland – an inherent part of the European educational market – cannot be pursued independently of the Council of Europe's concept of a plurilingual and pluricultural community that is capable of

effective communication and exchange of achievements and values. Thus for the use in teaching Chinese, basing on the CEFR's original division into three broad levels (A – Basic User, B – Independent User, C – Proficient User), six levels divided further into two sublevels are proposed, using letters and numbers to denominate level codes (see CEFR 2001:23–24, Martyniuk 2007:65) as shown below:

Breakthrough – Elementary A1.1
Breakthrough – Basic A1.2
Waystage – Extended A2.1
Waystage – Target A2.2

Threshold – Pre-Threshold B1.1
Threshold – Threshold Proper B1.2
Vantage – Prefatory B2.1
Vantage – Relative B2.2

Effective Operational Proficiency – Intermediate C1.1
Effective Operational Proficiency – Advanced C1.2
Mastery – Professional C2.1
Mastery – Expert Professional C2.2

Each level consists of less and more advanced stages of language competence which are numbered 1 or 2 (with extensions). If needed, further distinctions to scale the levels of the courses are possible. Such division occurs to be of importance in the light of a relatively slow increase in language competence within a language course when compared to the teaching of European languages. Only an intensive multi-hour course can cover the syllabus for the main level, like A1, A2, B1 etc. It must be emphasized that learning Chinese is time-consuming and every step has to be completed carefully in a course, otherwise a learner will quit already at an early stage, unable to build up communicative competence determined by linguistic competences. Yet since the level-specific curriculum is not in any way linked to the teaching materials or methods, its code never indicates the level to be completed within a course but the level within which that given course is covered. Language proficiency consists of the skills of using that language in the communication tasks. There is no absolute value of competences that would stretch across the full scope of proficiency for the particular level and fulfil with accuracy the criteria that permit advancement to the next level in a sequence. Yet the distance between the proficiency levels marked A, B and C does not imply equal time and effort involved in achieving the goal (CEFR 2001:31–33). Any higher and more advanced level always has a wider scope and is founded upon the already worked out skills, as pictured below:
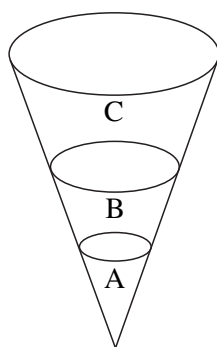
If a course covers part of the objectives of the curriculum defined for the given level, it should define in a code the scope for the level of intermediate stages. An action-oriented approach offered in the CEFR to teach the use of language as the communication tasks in the community uses various criteria for descriptors, and therefore a thematic and lexical range along with the linguistic competences have been applied in the basic level curriculum for Chinese language teaching.

Basic level curriculum

Most native speakers of Polish start classes in Chinese without any socio-cultural background as regards the Chinese context. Therefore understanding the culture and some basic linguistic guidelines provides them with an idea of the communicative context in Chinese. Linguistic knowledge in itself is not the aim here; it is a source of a conscious approach to see the language and its written code, the characters, as a systemic structure in phonology and phonetics, syntax, semantics and orthography, all of them being essential in developing integrated communication skills. One must first acquire language components and the four skills to be able to use them if they are to be integrated in an act of communication.

The objectives and assumptions for the basic level curriculum have been determined by the language activities to be provided for within the scope relevant for the level as well as the linguistic competences and the strategies conditioning reception and production, required for the A1 and A2 levels. The said activities are delineated in the curriculum by the anticipated verbal communication skills in the socio-cultural context of the specified area, along with the necessary lexical and grammatical competences in that respect. Using CEFR (2001) as an instrument that facilitates incorporating the sinological glottodidactics into the European standards of learning, teaching and assessing language competences, a curriculum for the basic level has been proposed here. The four skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, along with the starting skills and the fragmentary linguistic and socio-cultural skills, have to be cultivated at every level. However, attention must be paid to keep them well-proportioned and sequenced properly at every stage of the

teaching / learning process. A teaching program, if drawn out of the curriculum rooted in the CEFR's task approach, guarantees sequential stages and effective support in the proficiency competence development.

The teaching programs and materials can differ in highlighting skills and abilities. What matters most is their inner coherence and consistency with the curriculum, which is not a guide for the teaching process but a kind of well programmed approach and syllabus of the formal tools needed for the expected communication range. Therefore teaching methods are not included in the curriculum.

Objectives and assumptions

The main goal in Chinese language teaching at the basic level is to provide learner with the communicative competence corresponding to the scope of the Waystage – Target level (A2.2). However, that stage requires an approach which can provide true beginners[2] with learning techniques and strategies and give them a chance to develop language proficiency in all four skills in the future. Due to the difficulties in pronouncing Chinese tones as well as in writing and reading Chinese characters while taking the first steps in the learning process, the starting skills, which strongly determine the fluent and correct use of the spoken and written language, have been distinguished. The very basic language competence cannot emerge without advanced phonation skills that would correspond with the articulatory phonetics. As regards the reading and writing skills and the acquisition of lexemes, awareness of the radicals and the kinetic memory of the strokes in a word notation contribute to the passive recognition of the semantics of ideograms and to the active inscription of a word as well as to imaging while processing the word in one's mind. The basic level curriculum refers to simple everyday contacts, routines, places, issues that fit within the category of pragmatic functions which form a natural basis for word-formation categories. They are part of the set of entries defined for the program in quantitative terms estimated by the number of lexical and grammatical morphemes. They include the vocabulary for true beginners, starting from naming persons and things in learners' direct environment to everyday affairs a foreigner can face in a Chinese-speaking community. Thus for the A1 level there are approximately 450 morphemes, and for the A2 level there are some 1,000 morphemes in the simplified and traditional writing systems (i.e. 600 and 1,300 characters in the two systems, respectively). Grammar issues introduce word, phrase and sentence constructing issues that are necessary for elementary and basic communication in the cases of simple contacts with native users of Chinese as provided for in the CEFR indicators. Parallel to gradual advancement in the basic linguistic behavior, it is also necessary to make learners familiar with social and cultural realities so that their knowledge of the culture and the society facilitated, motivated and

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[2] A true beginner starts learning, while a false beginner is already familiar with some words or structures but his / her experience with a new language is insufficient to let him / her communicate.

enhanced the usage of the learned structures and expressions in communicative contexts. The optimum time of completing the program for each of the two discussed levels, i.e. A1 and A2, has been estimated on the basis of the hitherto practice as about 240 hours of practical classes in Modern Chinese.

Proposed curriculum for teaching basic Modern Chinese – set of entries
(Zajdler 2010)

Phonetics and orthography[3]

Phonetic transcription – the *pinyin*, tone marking
Relation between a sound and a letter in the *pinyin* transcription; register of tones
Exercising phonological hearing and the articulation of sounds
Matters related to writing Chinese characters, traditional vs. simplified characters
Radicals
Dictionary exercises

Thematic and lexical entries for A1

Polite phrases
Basic information about oneself and others
Names of everyday items, clothes, rooms at home
Family, children, education, profession
Countries, languages, popular Chinese last names
Ownership, belonging
Condition and features of people and objects in the closest environment
Directions and relations in space
Daily routines, moving around, shopping
Important public buildings (such as the office, the school, the university, the library, the railway station, the shop etc.)
Numbers, amount, money
Time, calendar
Basic information about accommodation, basic personal information in a form / an ID
Means of transportation
Attitude to the contents of an utterance (modality) within the basic scope of the following: want, be able to, can, have
Basic groceries, selected dishes
Basic interaction (questions, answers and negations expressed in phrases and in sentences)

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[3]   Basically for the A1 level

Scope of grammar entries for A1

Personal pronouns, possessive pronouns, demonstrative pronouns
A copular sentence
SVO sequence in the sentence
Question words: 誰, 什麼, 誰的, 哪個, 怎麼, 哪兒, 什麼時候, 幾, 多少,
Question words position in the sentence
Negation 不 and 沒
Question particles 嗎 and 呢
Verb-NEG-Verb questions
Most often used adverbs
Adjectives as a predicate and as a modifier; attributive and structural particle 的
Default object and content object, the VO verbs
Numbers
Most popular classifiers
Adjectives 多 and 少; quantifier phrases
Interrogative pronouns concerning date and time, word order in interrogative sentences
Position of the adverbial of time in a sentence
Prepositional vs. post-verbal locative phrases
Time and location prepositions
Question Word referring to the location; word order
Intensifiers to adjectives as a predicate and as a modifier
Focussing construction 是... 的
Most frequent modal verbs
Imperative particle 吧
Directional verbs

Thematic and lexical entries for A2

Extending the limited vocabulary from the thematic range for A1: an individual / family
   and friends / one's close environment and places / activities / daily routines / everyday
   items
Expressing intensity of a feature and skill level
Assessing intensity and skill level
Comparing, similarities and differences in features and abilities
Expressing consent, will, possibility; naming skills, abilities (or lack of any of these)
Requests and orders
Naming current activity and activity planned for the future
Parallelism, sequence and conditionality of activities
Expressing the perfective aspect and the resultativity of simple daily routines
Expressing the duration of an activity
Education, employment, dealing with basic formalities in an office

General physical and mental state, basic communication with a physician

Entertainment, leisure, hobbies, basic information about traveling

Natural phenomena, seasons, weather

Favorite places, colors, elements of culture and tradition

Expressing percentage, fractions, numbers up to a million (the specificity of the numeric system in the range up to 10,000)

Scope of grammar entries for A2

Ordinal numbers

Negative particle in the imperative 别

Most frequent modal verbs (follow-up)

Degree complement (得+ intensifiers and manner adverbials)

Manner phrase with 地

Constructions that link concurrent, sequenced, conditional activities

Constructions that express comparing features and abilities

Prepositional construction that expresses distance and direction

The perfective particle 了 and the experiential particle 過

Pivotal sentences

Cause-and-effect construction

Directional and resultative verbs (follow-up)

Potential verbs

Modal particles

Durative aspect

Topicalization, SOV order, 把 construction

被 construction

Classifiers (follow-up)

Verbal classifiers

Compound sentences and basic copulative, disjunctive and adversative conjunctions

Adverbs and particles used in the phrase and sentence structures listed above

Reduplication

The sociolinguistic and cultural aspect for the basic level covers basic polite phrases, skillful establishment of contacts and participation in simple informal conversations in line with the conversation formats suitable for the Eastern culture. Moreover, the symbols (e.g. the dragon), colors (e.g. red), rituals (such as expressing respect), values (social order etc.) linked directly with the culture of the East as well as the richness of tradition and thought represented by the Chinese characters constitute a background for learning the language and implementing communication.

Provided that the CEFR promotes the plurilingual and intercultural communication approach to the language education, the attempt to standardize Chinese language teaching in Poland according to its principles seems reasonable. The very first step on the way to

achieve that goal has been to draft the curriculum for the basic level with the basis of the language functions and items on the said level, with a broad space to create teaching programs for the courses dedicated to diverse addressees and proceeded in various ways. In a long-ranging perspective, the basic level can serve as a stable point of reference for the certification tests which are assumed as a means to evaluate examined people's fluency in a language rather that their achievements within the language courses taken.

The unification of teaching content and assessment criteria is proposed under the common theme of language tasks and positive description of the acquired skills (the 'Can Do' descriptors). The issue of assessment, an integral component of the educational activities, has been undertaken in this study from the perspective of the certification tests in language competences on the basic level. Based on the levels provided for in the framework, it is possible to carry out exams and certify overall language proficiency regardless of the mode of education, the learning time, the nature of the detailed teaching program, and the methods and materials used in the teaching process. The framework offers a unified scope of language competences that can be arrived at with the use of a variety of methods. Bearing in mind the requirement to chart the direction for developing external exams carried out to certify language proficiency, the author hereby points to objective testing and analytical assessment criteria as the optimum methods of external assessment of language competences.

Starting with the basic level A1 and A2, this article is meant to encourage a discussion and an analysis of the process of language teaching and the assessment of proficiency in Chinese.

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