Placement Test Development for Chinese Heritage Language Learners

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Abstract

Many universities have offered separate-track courses for non-heritage and heritage language learners. However, heritage learners’ heterogeneity in terms of their target language proficiency still makes it difficult to place them in appropriate classes. This study describes the placement exam development for Chinese heritage learners in a Southern Californian university through assessing heritage learners’ formal education background, oral interview performance, and Chinese writing ability. To reveal students’ oral proficiency and ensure consistent and accurate responses, the students’ detailed interview answers were compared with their family background and Chinese learning background that students provided via a survey. This initial analysis indicates that the placement exam is effective only if both the oral interview and the written proficiency components are combined with the survey of the students’ educational background. This combination instrument may serve as a guide for developing local placement exams and may be useful for future less commonly taught heritage languages.

Keywords: placement test, heritage learners, Chinese

I Introduction

Many universities have offered separate-track courses for non-heritage and heritage language learners. Numerous studies in the recent past have offered theoretical support to such a practice (Che-
valier, 2004; Ke, 1998; Kim, 2007; Lee, 2005; Shen, 2003; Yu, 2007; Wu, 2007; Xiao, 2006). These studies investigated similarities and differences between the two types of learners and found that they have different needs in language learning. Heritage learners need to connect oral language with the written form, while their non-heritage counterparts need to develop both oral and written skills. Therefore, heritage and non-heritage learners should ideally be placed in separate tracks as decided by the results of placement tests.

Based upon observation of heritage learners in our Chinese courses, we suspect that some students have been less than honest when taking the placement tests in order to receive an easy “A.” They pretend not to understand listening questions and write very short responses or make mistakes intentionally. Therefore, teachers may be lead to misjudge students’ actual oral and writing proficiency. Moreover, these unfortunate practices and sometimes negative attitudes towards learning displayed by heritage learners may negatively affect non-heritage students, who “frequently feel left out and intimidated” in these Chinese learning settings (Sohn & Shin, 2007, p. 408). The study aims to investigate whether students’ former Chinese education background, oral interview results and writing proficiency are primary factors for identifying Chinese heritage learners’ language proficiency.

II Related Research

1 Defining Heritage Language Learners

Heritage language learners have been defined by various factors. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) National Standards (1999) defines heritage learners as “students who have a home background in the language studied… these students may come to class able to converse in the language in home and community situations, but may lack the abilities to interact comfortably in more formal settings. Further, they may be quite comfort-
able with oral language but possess limited skills in reading and writing” (p. 29).

The ACTFL definition as well as those proposed by scholars (e.g., Carreira, 2004; Chevalier, 2004; Sohn & Shin, 2007; Valdés, 2001; Xiao, 2006) emphasize three important factors when identifying heritage learners: the learners’ place in the heritage language community, their personal connection to the target language and culture through the family background, and their imbalanced language skills in the heritage language.

Chinese heritage speakers are further defined by such factors as bilingual use of Chinese and English, high oral and aural literacy versus limited written literacy in Chinese, and lack of formal knowledge of Chinese. For example, Ke (1998) and Shen (2003) categorized Chinese heritage speakers as bilingual speakers of English and Chinese (Mandarin Chinese or one of the Chinese dialects, such as Cantonese, Hakka, or Southern Min), who are exposed to some form of Chinese orally and aurally at home. Heritage learners are heterogeneous in terms of their historical and cultural backgrounds and their target language proficiency (Kondo-Brown, 2003). Wu (2007) also found that Chinese heritage speakers were heterogeneous in terms of their proficiency in the target language, because “some have had prior formal Chinese educational experiences, such as attending school for a few years before immigrating to the United States, attending Sunday Chinese school, or being taught at home by their parents or relatives” (p. 275). These definitions describe heritage learners as possessing imbalanced oral and written language development, but they fail to take into account students’ communicative abilities. In the current study, Chinese heritage learners are conceived as those who can communicate in Chinese with at least one of their native Chinese-speaking family members. Students with Chinese-speaking family members, such as those of the third or fourth generation, are not automatically classified as heritage learners. For instance, a student who has a Chinese family background but cannot speak Chinese with any
family members should be identified as a non-heritage learner.

2 Chinese Heritage Language Research

Scholars have recognized the importance of understanding Chinese heritage learners’ language background. For example, Ke (1998) conducted a study examining first-year college heritage learners and non-heritage learners in Chinese character recognition. The students were asked to identify the pronunciations and meanings of 30 Chinese characters and to produce another 30 characters from their textbooks. The study indicates that there was no significant difference between the two groups in character recognition and production scores. However, Ke acknowledged that he lacked information about the students’ academic profiles and their motivations for Chinese learning. Therefore, Kondo-Brown (2003) suggested that future studies should consider students’ language background such as the number of years of formal Chinese language education in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States.

Xiao (2006) investigated the relationship between home background and heritage learners’ Chinese literacy levels. She studied 20 heritage and 18 non-heritage learners at the high beginning level of an intensive Chinese course at a New England university. The results indicate that students’ home background did not affect character writing. In the same study, Xiao continued to investigate learners (n = 148) in beginning, intermediate and advanced level classes to examine the relationship between home background and Chinese language development. The study showed that heritage learners did not perform significantly better than non-heritage peers in reading comprehension, vocabulary learning, and character writing, and that home background did not lead Chinese heritage speakers to acquire reading and writing skills more quickly than non-heritage speakers.

Shen (2003) studied the connection between Chinese heritage learners’ language background and their Chinese writing performance. She analyzed two groups: a homogeneous group (heritage
students only) and a heterogeneous group (heritage students mixed with non-heritage students). She found that heritage students in the homogenous group performed better in written Chinese with one year of study than heritage students in the heterogeneous groups with two years of study. Her study suggests that tracking based on language background enables Chinese heritage learners to improve their writing skills and their overall Chinese literacy.

3 Related Researches in Heritage Learners’ Placement

Many U.S. colleges use commercial tests to place heritage learners. In a national survey of 169 modern foreign language departments in the U.S., Brown, Hudson & Clark (2004) found that the most commonly used commercial tests were Advanced Placement (AP) subjects, the Brigham Young University Computer Adaptive Placement Exam (CAPE), and Wisconsin College Level Placement Test. However, they found that these tests did not specifically target heritage learners. The most cited reasons for using these tests were “the availability of these tests for the most commonly taught languages” and their already “widespread use in other programs” (p. 10). Other reasons for using such tests include top-down administrative decisions and practical considerations, such as the lack of staff to develop and administer localized tests.

Few institutions have developed local placement instruments for heritage learners. Only one such local test has been reported. Recently, UCLA designed a placement test for Korean heritage speakers, which consisted of two parts: (1) a standardized multiple-choice section testing listening, grammar, and reading skills and (2) a composition section (Shohn and Shin, 2007). The test showed that Korean heritage learners manifested disparities between oral and written skills; they achieved high scores in listening and low scores in compo-
sition. In addition, there existed a significant gap between scores in the standardized section and the composition section. Therefore, Shohn and Shin (2007) suggest additional face-to-face interviews with students whose scores are vastly divergent in the two sections.

The placement instrument that Shohn and Shin (2007) described has some limitations. First, the composition prompt for heritage learners is inappropriate. In the UCLA placement test, “test takers are expected to be able to write an argumentative essay on an assigned topic” (p. 418). According to Chevalier (2004), heritage language courses should develop students’ literacy skills by increasing their familiarity with written genres. Different genres suited different pedagogical stages: conversation for Stage I, description and narration for stage II, evaluation and explanation for Stage III, and argumentation for Stage IV. Chevalier suggests that argumentation is appropriate for testing advanced heritage learners and narrative style is better than argumentative style for testing intermediate level learners. Second, the face-to-face interview makes listening in the standardized section redundant because the interview can test students’ listening ability. Similarly, the grammar subsection is unnecessary because it will be tested in the composition section.

Current placement measures for Chinese heritage learners are inadequate. Chinese programs frequently use students’ self-assessment, an instructor’s referral, and commercial tests. The self-assessment measure lets students make judgments as to whether they are heritage or non-heritage learners. An instructor’s referral is another way of helping make placement decisions for heritage and non-heritage classes. As both measures are subjective and unreliable, they could misguide heritage learners in their Chinese studies.

Commercially-produced tests that are commonly used in foreign language programs target various Chinese learning populations but not heritage learners. For instance, the popular Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) II Chinese is designed for high school students who have studied Chinese as a foreign language for two to four years
(Sohn and Shin, 2007). The test consists of three sections: listening, grammatical structural knowledge, and reading comprehension. However, SAT II does not reflect Chinese heritage learners’ writing proficiency prior to college. The weaknesses of these existing placement measures make it imperative for college Chinese programs to develop their own measurement instruments.

III. Chinese Curriculum

The placement test was conducted at a large comprehensive university with nearly 36,000 students in southern California. In 1984, the university started offering Chinese courses for learners who had no prior knowledge of Chinese. In the 1990s, the number of Chinese immigrants increased steadily in Southern California areas, thus providing a maintenance environment for Chinese spoken as a heritage language. In order to major in International Business with a Chinese concentration, students must complete twelve semester units or four upper-division Chinese courses, including two business and two culture classes. The two culture courses were also made available to students as part of their general education (GE) requirements that all students, regardless of their majors, must take.

Table 1 describes the tracking practice in the Chinese program. Based on different Chinese proficiency levels, students were placed in dual tracks of Chinese classes: (1) Elementary Chinese for true beginners CHIN 101 and CHIN 102, (2) a heritage language track CHIN 201 and CHIN 202, (3) a non-heritage language track CHIN 203 and CHIN 204, and (4) merged upper-division courses for both heritage and non-heritage learners.
Table 1: Tracking practices in the Chinese program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Code</th>
<th>Course Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHIN 101</td>
<td>Fundamental Chinese A (non-heritage class)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHIN 102</td>
<td>Fundamental Chinese B (non-heritage class)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHIN 201</td>
<td>Chinese for Heritage Speakers A (Heritage Class)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHIN 202</td>
<td>Chinese for Heritage Speakers B (Heritage Class)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHIN 203</td>
<td>Intermediate Chinese A (non-heritage class)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHIN 204</td>
<td>Intermediate Chinese B (non-heritage class)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Merged System for Advanced Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHIN 310</td>
<td>Mandarin Chinese in the Business World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHIN 311</td>
<td>Mandarin Chinese for International Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHIN 315</td>
<td>Introduction to Chinese Civilization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHIN 325</td>
<td>Contemporary Chinese Culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Chinese placement test for heritage speakers offered by the Chinese program is a local testing instrument given on the first day of each semester. Each student is required to take the test, which is designed to assess students’ Chinese levels. The test places some of them into different levels of Chinese. Failure to take the test results in being disallowed to enroll in any Chinese classes.

IV Placement Test Development

A first step – and a primary factor – involves a questionnaire that asks the number of years a student has taken Chinese in K-12 schools and weekend schools in the U.S. The analysis of an oral interview and composition task is used to describe heritage learners’ oral and writing performance.
Step One: Identifying Educational Background

First, students were asked for demographic information including their own birthplace and their parents’ birthplaces (see Appendix A). Then, students were asked to provide information about the number of years and places where they received Chinese education as full-time students in both target language settings and the United States. Students were asked to list all family members, including mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, and others, with whom they might communicate in the target language because communicating with family members in Chinese at home is an important factor in defining Chinese heritage learners. Siblings were put in the “others” category because Mainland China has a one-child policy, and many students do not have siblings.

Twenty-two students who planned to take Chinese courses participated in a placement test in the fall of 2007. They were born in target language settings: Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mainland China, U.S., Holland, and non-Chinese-dominant Asian countries. Each heritage student was labeled as H1, H2 … H22. Based on the number of years that they were educated in target language settings, the heritage learners were divided into three groups:

Group 1 (n = 8) included students with no formal education in target language settings, who received all their education in the United States.

Group 2 (n = 5) consisted of students who finished elementary school education in target language settings.

Group 3 (n = 9) included those who finished middle school education in target language settings.

Step Two: Taking Oral Interviews

To check students’ Chinese oral proficiency, all students took an oral interview test, which elicited further information regarding their questionnaire responses. The following questions were
asked and answered in Chinese:

1) 你的中文和英文名字是什么?
   (What are your Chinese and English names?)
2) 你是在哪里出生的?
   (Where were you born?)
3) 你的专业是什么?
   (What is your major?)
4) 你在哪里上的小学, 初中, 高中和大学?
   (Where did you attend elementary school, middle school, and high school?)
5) 你在家和谁说中文？
   (With whom can you speak Chinese at home?)
6) Other questions in the questionnaire (see Appendix A).

Based on the ACTFL proficiency guidelines (see Appendix B), Group 1 achieved scores ranging from 0+ to 1 points (Novice – High level to Intermediate – Mid/Low level). Group 2 achieved scores from 1 to 1+ (Intermediate – Mid/Low level to intermediate – High level). Group 3 achieved scores from 1+ to 2+ (Intermediate – High level to Advanced Plus level). The oral placement test results indicate that communication with family members in Chinese at home constitutes a significant factor for their oral communicative competences in the target language.

Students with higher oral proficiency scores are the students who frequently communicate with their family members at home. As shown in Table 2, all students spoke Chinese with their family members, and none of the students in the three groups spoke English only at home. Group 1 was the only group in which some used more English than Chinese at home. Group 1 most frequently (50%) used half Chinese and half English at home. The students in
Group 2 (40%) used more Chinese than English at home compared to Group 3 (44.4%).

Table 2: Languages Used at Home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group 1 (n = 8)</th>
<th>Group 2 (n = 5)</th>
<th>Group 3 (n = 9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English only</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More English than Chinese</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half Chinese and half English</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>22.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Chinese than English</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese only</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>33.30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To further understand their Chinese proficiency, particularly their listening and speaking abilities, the communication activities within the learners’ families were surveyed. The results indicate that Chinese heritage learners preferred to communicate with their parents rather than their grandparents and others in Chinese. According to Table 3, all students among the three groups most frequently spoke Chinese with their mothers with the average percentage of 80%. All of the students in Group 3 said that they used Chinese with their fathers compared to Group 1 (62.5%) and Group 2 (80%). As for speaking with their grandparents, the three groups ranged from 20% to 55%. Group 2 most frequently spoke Chinese with other family members (80%) compared to Group 1 (25%) and Group 3 (55.6%).
Table 3: Communicating with Family Members in Chinese

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group 1 (n=8)</th>
<th>Group 2 (n=5)</th>
<th>Group 3 (n=9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandfather</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is reasonable to suggest that more years of learning Chinese in target language settings enabled students to communicate more frequently with their family members in oral Chinese. Communication in Chinese also depends on the English proficiency of their parents and grandparents and other family members. If family members’ English is not good enough, learners have to communicate in Mandarin Chinese or Chinese dialects.

**Step Three: Writing Proficiency Tests**

Narrative style is better-suited than argumentative style for students to demonstrate their writing competence at the lower-division level (Chevalier, 2004). Therefore, a 30-minute letter-writing task was administered. Students were asked to write a short letter (about 150-300 Chinese characters) in Chinese according to the following English prompt:

*Your Chinese friend, Jing, who is in Beijing now, will study in California next fall. Since she has never studied in the U.S. before, she wrote a letter to you asking about life on campus. She wanted to know how to rent an apartment close to campus, where she could find a part-time job, and how she should deal with any culture shock that she might experience. All the above-mentioned questions need to be addressed in your response.*

The writing samples were graded by two Chinese instructors, who were trained specifically for this duty. The writing samples were graded in terms of the following scoring rubric: vocabulary, grammar,
and organization on a scale of 0 to 5 adopted from Sohn and Shin’s (2007) rating range:

0 = none
1 = limited
2 = moderate
3 = good
4 = very good
5 = native-like

The scores for the writing test were on a scale that goes from a lowest score of 0 to a highest possible score of 15 of all three parts: vocabulary, grammar, and organization (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Writing Proficiency Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group 1 (n=8)</th>
<th>Group 2 (n = 5)</th>
<th>Group 3 (n = 9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The letter-writing task was difficult for Group 1; students earned mean scores of 4.87 points (SD = 2.20). In Group 2 (n = 5), students earned mean scores of 9.8 points (SD = 2.78). Students in Group 3 (n = 9) scored mean scores of 12.3 points (SD = 1.80). The results show that the number of years of formal Chinese education correlates positively with students’ higher mean scores of writing performance.

Based on the placement test scores including oral and writing parts, it suggests that heritage speakers whose writing scores are over 4.87 points are potentially qualified to take the Chinese courses for heritage speakers CHIN 201. The heritage speakers whose writing scores are over 9.80 points are potentially qualified to take the Chinese courses for heritage speakers CHIN 202. The heritage speakers whose writing scores are over 12.3 points are potentially qualified for
upper-division Chinese courses, such as Chinese civilization and Chinese for international business courses.

V Teacher Perspectives on Placement Test

At the end of the semester, an interview regarding instructors’ feedback on the placement test was conducted with two instructors who taught the Chinese courses for heritage speakers. One teacher stated, “Students’ formal educational background is a reliable indicator of their Chinese proficiency” (interview with Corrina).

The instructor confirmed the positive correlation between former Chinese education in target language settings and Chinese writing performance. She observed that students who finished middle school or high school in native Chinese-speaking settings had better Chinese writing skills than students who were born in the U.S. or came to the U.S. before middle school. Specifically, she stated that “the length of staying in the U.S. will affect heritage learners’ writing skills because they do not have many opportunities to write Chinese” (interview with Corrina). The other instructor indicated that:

The placement test should focus on assessing students’ use of Chinese characters and vocabulary bank and their familiarity with Chinese sentence structures, grammar, punctuation, and writing organization. The writing task could include different types of questions, e.g., translating a passage or writing a short story based on given pictures (interview with Wendy).

Further, the teacher suggested that in order to make the placement test valid, both the oral interview questions and the writing task need to be altered from time to time. If they remain unchanged, over time they will become an “open secret” for students who want
to take the Chinese classes for heritage speakers in the future. The effectiveness of the tests will be questioned if this happens.

VI Implications for Future Research

Previous research has failed to develop specific criteria to determine the target language proficiencies among heritage learners. As heritage learners’ target language proficiency is multifaceted, it is hard to place learners of different proficiency levels. Thus, it is also essential to identify their target language proficiency levels before placing them in classes.

To reveal students’ oral proficiency, the students’ detailed interview answers should be compared with their family background and Chinese learning background provided in the survey to make sure their answers are consistent and accurate. The placement exam is effective only if both the oral interview and the written proficiency components are combined with the survey of the students’ educational background.

Two major limitations of the present study exist. First, this study focuses on a Southern Californian university, which is surrounded by large Chinese communities and is attended by many heritage Chinese learners. The placement instrument in the present study may not work as well at institutions in other regions of the United States. Because of the small enrollments of Chinese heritage learners, some Chinese programs have to place heritage learners of various Chinese proficiencies in the same class or place both heritage and non-heritage learners in the same class. Second, the study has examined a relatively small sample size involving twenty-five students and one instructor. Future studies may examine larger sample sizes of heritage Chinese learners and instructors.

Currently, one of the major discussion issues for placement test development is the influence of computer-assisted testing methods. Allen’s (2008) study suggests integration of Chinese handwrit-
ing skills with the new electronic writing technologies rather than the traditional paper-and-pencil approach. In addition, Eda, Itomitsu and Noda (2008) state that developers are considering online versions of the Japanese Skills Test (JSKIT). If heritage learners are allowed to complete the Chinese composition section of the placement test online, this might impact the results of their placement tests.

The heritage-related motivation and parental involvement are currently the most significant variables for East Asian language learners studying languages such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Liu and Shibata, 2008; Sung and Padilla, 1998; Valdes, 2001; Nunn, 2006); many language programs have been or will develop the placement tests for heritage learners of these languages. Based on the results of a recent, short-term (8-week) summer study abroad program in China, it was found that students with a Mandarin Chinese heritage family background in which their parents did not frequently communicate in Mandarin Chinese improved their Chinese more rapidly compared to their true beginner counterparts (Liu, 2010). After the study abroad program, some heritage students mentioned that they increasingly communicated with their parents and grandparents in Chinese. This combination instrument may serve as a guide for developing local placement exams and study abroad program for heritage language learners, and may be useful for future less commonly taught heritage languages.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr. Xiaoye You of Pennsylvania State University for his insightful suggestions during the preparation of this article.
References


Appendix A

Questionnaire

Your responses on this questionnaire will remain confidential. Please answer as openly and honestly as you can. We appreciate and value your input. Thanks.

English Name__________________

Chinese Name ______________

Gender _______________

Major ___________________

Where were you born? _______________

Where was your mother born? _______________

Where was your father born? ___________

Place where you attended elementary school

____________________

Place where you attended middle school _____________________

Place where you attended high school

________________________

Chinese Language Education History

1. Have you ever taken a college Chinese course prior to this class?
   a. Yes   b. No
2. If you answer “yes” to the above question, when did you take the Chinese course?
   a. elementary school   b. middle school   c. high school
   d. community college/university
3. Have you ever taken Chinese courses in Chinese weekend schools?
   a. Yes    b. No

4. Please circle the items that best describes how much Chinese is used in your family?
   a. English only
   b. More English than Chinese
   c. Half Chinese and half English
   d. More Chinese than English
   e. Chinese only

5. Without counting yourself, which of your family members use more Chinese than English at home?
   a. Mother   b. Father   c. Grandmother   d. Grandfather   e. Others
Appendix B

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines

Superior (3 - 3+) Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations

Advanced Plus (2+) Able to satisfy most work requirements and show some ability to communicate on concrete topics

Advanced (2) Able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements

Intermediate – High (1+) Able to satisfy most survival needs and limited social demands

Intermediate – Mid/Low (1) Able to satisfy basic survival needs and minimum courtesy requirements

Novice – High (0+) Able to satisfy immediate needs with learned utterances

Novice - Mid/Low (0) Able to operate in only a very limited capacity or no ability whatsoever in the language.