

The Use of English in the Chinese Language Classroom: Perspectives from American College Students

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For a long time, whether learners' first language (L1) should be used in the foreign language classroom has been a controversial issue in the foreign language education field. The focus has been mostly on the use of L1 in the English language classroom (e.g., Atkinson, 1987; Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Kieu, 2010; Krashen, 1981; Miles, 2004; Nazary, 2008; Prodromou, 2002; Schweers, 1999; Tang, 2002). The debate centers on two diverse pedagogical approaches: the monolingual approach and the bilingual approach. The supporters of the monolingual approach contend that only the target language that learners are acquiring (i.e. English in most of the study) should be allowed in the classroom, and Krashen (1981, 1985) was a pivotal supporter of this approach. However, other researchers and language teachers argue that the monolingual approach is not practical, particularly in lower-level classes (e.g., Atkinson, 1987; Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Schweers, 1999; Tang, 2002). They believe that using L1 in the classroom can be very effective when explaining difficult grammar points and linguistic elements that are language specific. The supporters of the bilingual approach do not deny the advantages of maximizing target language exposure and practice. However, they suggest that when learners' L1 is applied strategically, it can actually be a very important learning tool (e.g., Atkinson, 1987; Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Schweers, 1999). Furthermore, both Schweers (1999) and Miles (2004) point out that the use of L1 provides students a more relaxed atmosphere and makes them less anxious and more confident in the classroom.

The debate over the use of L1 in the classroom continues, and the majority of literature still centers on the use of L1 in the English classroom. Study concerning the use of L1 in a less-commonly-taught language classroom such as the use of L1 in a Chinese language classroom is scarce. According to a Modern Language Association (MLA) report, released in November 2007, several less commonly taught languages were among the most popular languages on

college campuses in fall 2006. MLA surveyed 2795 accredited, not-for-profit colleges and universities in the United States and reported that there was a growing interest in languages such as Arabic (up 127%), Chinese (up 51%), and Korean (up 37%) even when the study of the most popular languages Spanish (up 10.3%), French (up 2.2%), and German (3.5%), continued to grow. The growth of the number of students interested in learning less commonly taught languages in the United States is apparent, and more attention should be paid to issues such as pedagogical approaches in less-commonly-taught language classrooms and students' attitudes toward those languages. This study aims to contribute to the literature by surveying American college students who study Chinese at a small liberal arts college in the United States about their perspectives toward the role of English (L1) in the Chinese language classroom. The study will consider questions such as whether their Chinese teacher should use English in the Chinese language classroom and whether students themselves should use English in the Chinese class.

It is important to recognize that the interaction between instructor and students in a foreign language classroom is reciprocal. Moreover, investigation of what pedagogical approach works better in a language classroom is as critical as exploration of learners' attitudes, needs, motivations, and/or feelings inside the classroom. Due to space constraint, this study focuses only on learners' attitudes toward the use of English in a Chinese language classroom.

Methods

All the data analyzed in this study were collected through a survey at a small liberal arts college in the southern region of the United States in September, 2010.

Participants

There are 51 participants from four different levels of Chinese language courses: Chinese 101, Chinese 201, Chinese 301, and Chinese 440. Among the 51 participants, only five of them are female. Twenty-eight participants are from two sections of the Chinese 101 class, the first semester of the first-year Chinese course. Each Chinese class meets three times a week, and 50 minutes each time.

These 28 students had only studied Chinese for two and a half weeks (i.e. about eight contact hours of Chinese lessons) at the time when they participated in the survey. Sixteen of the 51 participants are from the Chinese 201 class, the first semester of the second-year Chinese course. At the time when they participated in the survey, they had received about 98 contact hours of instruction. There are five students in the Chinese 301 class, the first semester of the third-year Chinese course. Each of them had about 188 contact hours in the Chinese classroom. There are only two students in the Chinese 440 class. These two participants are the only students who had total immersion experiences. Both students had just returned from study abroad programs in China at the time when they participated in the survey. One of them (Student A) had studied Chinese for two years, one year at a high school in the United States and one year in China. While Student A was in China, he lived with a Chinese family and attended a Chinese program for international students at a high school full-time. The other student (Student B) also had studied Chinese for two years, half of a year in high school, one year at college in the United States, and four months at a university in China. While Student B was in China, he stayed in a dormitory for international students. He had Chinese language courses twenty hours a week. Chinese 101, 201, and 301 are regular language classes in which Chinese instructors apply the bilingual approach, while Chinese 440 is a course, designed for students whose proficiency levels are beyond all the regular language classes. In Chinese 440, the monolingual approach is implemented as both students are comfortable with the Chinese-only instruction. One important note about the Chinese-only teaching method in the Chinese 440 class is that neither did the instructor impose the policy on students nor did the instructor identify the use of English as a hindrance for language learning. This Chinese-only approach was adopted naturally - based on the students' proficiency levels and their agreement.

Measures

The survey employed was adopted and slightly modified from Prodromou's (2002) well known survey (See Appendix 1 for a sample of the modified survey). In order to avoid any confusion that participants might have, terminology like "the students' mother-tongue"

and "L1" in Prodromou's survey have been replaced with "English" since English is the first language/mother tongue of all the participants. Moreover, "L2" was changed to "Chinese" because many of the participants have learned other foreign languages before, such as Spanish, German, French, and Russian. Therefore, it is more appropriate to use "Chinese" than "L2." In addition, "the teacher" was changed to "your Chinese teacher" in the modified survey. For example, question number 1 in Prodromou's survey, "Should the teacher know the students' mother tongue?", was changed to "Should your Chinese teacher (hereafter the teacher) know English?"

In the modified survey, two items were added. The first item was a heading, "In the Chinese Language Classroom". Since many of the students have studied other languages before, they might have different attitudes toward other language classrooms. It is hoped that a heading like that will focus students' attention on the Chinese language classroom. The second item was a "why" question that was inserted after the first question ("Should your Chinese teacher (hereafter the teacher) know English?") in order to solicit participants' specific reasons behind their Yes/No answers to the first question.

Procedures

The 16-item questionnaire with an additional *why* question after item #1 was modified from Prodromou's (2002) survey and was distributed to participants at four different levels of Chinese language classes (elementary-101, intermediate-201, advanced-301, and upper-advanced-440 classes) at a small liberal arts college in the southern region of the United States. All participants were given a copy of the questionnaire and a brief introduction to the purpose of the questionnaire. After the introduction, participants were asked to read through the questionnaire items and provide answers according to their own point of view.

After the participants completed the questionnaires, their responses were collected and calculated based on the number of the participants who agreed on the statements listed on the questionnaire (See Table 1 under Results). Participants were also asked to provide a written comment on "Why should your Chinese teacher know English?"; a summary of their comments is provided in Table 2.

Results

The results of participants' Yes/No responses are represented in Table 1, and the written comments are listed in Table 2. Based on the number of the participants who agree on a particular question, a percentage is calculated. For example, all 28 students from the Chinese 101 class agreed that their Chinese teacher should know English (Question #1); therefore, the percentage of the agreement is 100%. While in the Chinese 440 class, one of the two participants agreed, which gives 50% as the agreement result.

Table 1: Survey Results

	Chinese 101		Chinese 201		Chinese 301		Chinese 440	
Total: 51 students	Number of students: 28		Number of students: 16		Number of students: 5		Number of students: 2	
Question	Yes	%	Yes	%	Yes	%	Yes	%
# 1	28	100%	16	100%	5	100%	1	50%
# 2	25	89%	13	81%	5	100%	0	0%
# 3	15	54%	10	63%	3	60%	0	0%
# 4	27	96%	16	100%	5	100%	1	50%
# 5	28	100%	16	100%	5	100%	1	50%
# 6	28	100%	16	100%	5	100%	0	0%
# 7	28	100%	16	100%	5	100%	0	0%
# 8	18	64%	11	69%	1	20%	0	0%
# 9	12	43%	6	38%	1	20%	0	0%
# 10	16	57%	11	69%	2	40%	0	0%
# 11	25	89%	16	100%	5	100%	2	100%
# 12	25	89%	12	75%	5	100%	2	100%
# 13	24	86%	13	81%	5	100%	2	100%
# 14	24	86%	12	75%	4	80%	1	50%
# 15	25	89%	13	81%	3	60%	0	0%
# 16	25	89%	15	94%	5	100%	1	50%

On the survey, participants were asked to provide written comments on why their Chinese teacher should know English, and their responses were collected and listed in Table 2. Many of the written comments are similar; therefore, not all the comments are listed here.

Table 2: Summary of Participants' Written Comments
 "Why should your Chinese teacher know English?"

Chinese 101	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explain why/how the Chinese grammar functions • To communicate to the students and understand them • Some questions students might not be able to comprehend in Chinese • So when we ask questions, she can answer them. Perfect English is not necessary. • Yes, because directions can be hard to give if there is no understanding. • This will allow the teacher to smoothly translate words and grammatical techniques to the students. • Since we are beginners, we don't know Mandarin, so, we wouldn't be able to communicate. • I am only a beginner. I feel that my teacher knowing English is beneficial to my learning experience.
Chinese 201	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explain in a language I can understand • To communicate with the students • Yes, English students wouldn't be able to understand the Chinese teacher otherwise. • So I know exactly what the characters means and why some are the way they are. • To clarify Chinese meaning • It's easier to bridge gaps between Chinese and English in terms of grammatical, contextual, and cultural differences.
Chinese 301	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To better explain vocabulary and grammar • To understand questions or clearly give help • To ensure comprehension • To explain new information to the students
Chinese 440	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To help students, especially beginners, understand better

Discussion

The results indicate that these participants have a strong preference for the bilingual approach. All students but one (Student A) think that their Chinese teacher should know their L1 (English) in order to better explain, clarify, communicate, and/or understand students' questions (Question #1). Moreover, the majority of the students in the regular language classes (89%, 81%, and 100%) agreed that their Chinese teacher should use English in the classroom. Compared to the regular classes, students in the Chinese 440 class demonstrated a different pattern. Student A, who asserted that his Chinese teacher did not need to know English, has the highest Chinese language proficiency among the 51 participants. He also has the experience of living in China for one year with Chinese people who did not speak English. Therefore, he is more accustomed to utilizing Chinese to seek clarification, to communicate, and to check comprehension. The other student (Student B) in the Chinese 440 class preferred that his Chinese teacher know English; however, like Student A, he also did not want his Chinese teacher to use English in the classroom.

The split on preference for the use of English in the Chinese language classroom between Class 440 and the regular classes suggests that there is no one method that fits all. Even in the same institution, one type of the pedagogical approach might not be enough to accommodate all the classes. Language instructors should adjust their teaching methods, depending on students' background knowledge, needs, attitudes, and the learning environment. A "Chinese-only" policy from the first day of class might work well in one class, but might increase students' anxiety and affect their learning ability in another class (See Miles (2004) for other cases).

Furthermore, the result of Questions #2 and #3 shows that more students preferred for their Chinese teacher to use English in the Chinese language classroom while fewer were in favor of student use of English in the Chinese language classroom. Among the 51 participants, 43 of them agreed that their Chinese teacher should use English in the classroom, but only 28 of them agreed that students should use English in the classroom. This contrast, 43 vs. 28, demonstrates that students themselves are aware that they should make

use of the target language as much as possible in the classroom. However, they allow their teacher to use more English mainly because they need their teacher to use English to make new information understandable to them. This can be seen from the participants' written comments listed in Table 2.

According to the participants' responses to Questions #1 and #2, the participants favor their teacher using English in the Chinese language classroom when providing explanation and clarification, checking their comprehension, and otherwise communicating with them. The result from the participants indicates a high level of agreement on questionnaire items #4 to #8 because these items are about explaining new words, grammar, and differences between Chinese and English. The prediction was correct about items #4 to #7 in all classes, except in the upper-advanced class. In Chinese 201 and Chinese 301, there is unanimous (100%) agreement on all four questionnaire items. In Chinese 101, 96% indicated agreement for item #4 (explaining new words), and 100% agreement on the rest of the three items. Surprisingly, when it came to item #8 ("It is useful if the teacher uses English when giving instructions"), in all three regular language classes (Chinese 101, 201, and 301), the number of the students who agreed dropped significantly, 64%, 69%, and 20% respectively. This result is unexpected and worthy of exploring because giving instructions could be much more complex than explaining new words. Since four out of five participants in the Chinese 301 class circled "No" on their questionnaires, they were checked again individually in order to solicit further information about their perspectives. Those participants stated that they did not consider "giving instructions" as an event of giving or explaining new information; therefore, it should be done in Chinese. Moreover, they believed that if students already know these instructions in Chinese, such as "open your book", "repeat after me", and "please translate", then it is more useful if the Chinese teacher uses Chinese.

Based on the participants' responses to Question #3 ("Should the students use English in the Chinese language classroom?"), we should be able to predict the results of items #9 and #10. Since the participants did not approve of themselves using English in the Chinese language classroom, we could expect a relatively low percentage of the participants who would be in favor of themselves of using

English in situations like talking in pairs and groups or asking how to say "... " in English. The results: on average 50% in all three regular classes, confirmed what we predicted (See Table 1). Items #11 to #16 on the questionnaire are related to comprehension checking; therefore, we can predict that the participants would allow English to be used. Once again, the expectation was validated as the average percentage of the participants who agreed was fairly high.

Another crucial observation from the result presented in Table 1 is that students in the Chinese 440 class show a different perspective from the students in the Chinese 301 class in terms of whether their Chinese teachers should use English in the classroom. Students who are currently taking the third-year Chinese class still show a high percentage of agreement that their Chinese teacher should use English when explaining new information (100% in item #2 and items #4 to #7), while the students in the Chinese 440 class display quite a different standpoint, 0% for items #2, #6, and #7, and 50% for items #4 and #5. Students' perspectives are clearly related to how confident they are toward the use of the target language. Students who had experiences of study abroad in the target country for as few as four months accept the challenge of Chinese-only in the classroom. On the other hand, in this study, students who are in the regular language classes and do not have total immersion experiences in the target country welcome their Chinese teacher to use their L1 in the classroom even they are in the third-year Chinese class. Using English in the Chinese language classroom seems to reduce student anxiety toward new information given in the classroom. This study supports Schweers' (1999), Miles' (2004), and Brooks-Lewis's (2009) observations that the use of L1 can provide students a more relaxed atmosphere and make them more confident in the classroom.

However, the results of this study display an interesting contrast from Nazary's (2008) study. Nazary surveyed a group of 85 Iranian students who took English as a foreign language at Tehran University. Those students whose first language is Farsi were enrolled in three different levels of English classes: elementary, intermediate, and advanced English. Nazary's findings show that the majority of the participants were unwilling to use Farsi in the English language classroom and strongly declined the use of Farsi in order to seek maximum exposure to English (elementary 31%, intermediate 23%, and

advanced 18%). They also did not support the idea of their English teachers using Farsi in the English classroom (elementary 22%, intermediate 16%, and advanced 21%). However, the percentages of the number of the participants who agreed that their teachers should know their first language, Farsi, were relatively high (elementary 68%, intermediate 69%, and advanced 81%). It is an interesting question why the participants thought their teachers should know their first language if they did not want the teachers to use it in the English classroom. As Nazary points out, students' "negative attitude" toward the use of Farsi in the classroom is very likely due to their teachers' strong belief that the use of L1 in the English classroom is an obstruction for language learning.

Comparing with other studies in the literature (e.g., Prodro-mou, 2002; Nazary, 2008), this study included more different categories of participants, from students who are in various proficiency levels of regular language classes to students who have study abroad experiences. As illustrated above, there is an interesting difference between these two groups regarding the use of English in the Chinese language classroom. Therefore, there is still a need for more research that takes into account what has changed the participants' attitude toward the use of L1. Before Student B participated in the four-month study abroad program, he was not confident enough to carry out a conversation in Chinese though he had always done very well in class and had enough language to do so. However, after he returned from the study abroad program, his attitude toward the use of Chinese has made a dramatic change. Since his return, he has been insisting on using Chinese only both in and outside of the class. Obviously, it is the study abroad experience that has had the influence on him.

One important question for future research is how long the total immersion experience in a target-language country should be in order to make learners confident enough to change the way they use a target language in a non-target-language-speaking country. Is a three-week program enough? Or, does it have to be at least four months long? Another crucial question for further research is whether a total immersion program in a non-target-language-speaking country (such as a total immersion program in the United States) has the same effect on students in terms of learners' attitude toward the

use of the target language. These questions are critical as many institutions and government organizations in the United States have invested tremendous resources into study abroad programs (e.g., critical language study broad programs) and total immersion programs in the United States (such as Middlebury College's summer total immersion program).

Conclusion

The goal of this study is to explore learners' attitudes toward the use of L1 in a less-commonly-taught-language classroom. The author aimed to contribute to the literature by surveying American college students who study Chinese at a small liberal arts college in the United States about their perspectives toward the use of their first language, English, in the Chinese language classroom. The findings of this study support the tactical use of learners' first language in a foreign language classroom as several studies in the literature have concluded such as Schweers (1999), Tang (2002), Miles (2004), and Brooks-Lewis (2009). Moreover, this study compared the attitudes of students with and without study abroad experiences regarding the use of English in the Chinese language classroom. The results of this study seem to suggest that students with study abroad experiences welcome the monolingual approach, while those without such experiences have a preference for the bilingual approach. However, more data are needed to further support this suggestion as the number of participants with study abroad experiences in this study is very small.

To conclude, no matter what pedagogical approach is utilized, it is important to be sure that students are provided with a more relaxed atmosphere that will make them less anxious and more confident in the classroom. In order to achieve this result, learners' attitudes, needs, motivations and feelings need to be carefully taken into account.

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Appendix 1

The Questionnaire Sample:

The class you are currently enrolled:

101

201

301

440

	In the Chinese Language Classroom:	Your Answers
1.	Should your Chinese teacher (hereafter the teacher) know English?	Yes No
	Why?	
2.	Should the teacher use English?	Yes No
3.	Should the students use English?	Yes No
	It is useful if the teacher uses English when:	
4.	explaining new words	Yes No
5.	explaining grammar	Yes No
6.	explaining differences between English and Chinese grammar	Yes No
7.	explaining differences in the use of English and Chinese rules	Yes No
8.	giving instructions	Yes No

Students should be allowed to use English when :		
9.	talking in pairs and groups	Yes No
10.	asking how do we say '!' in English ?	Yes No
11.	translating a Chinese word into English to show they understand it	Yes No
12.	translating a text from Chinese to English to show they understand it	Yes No
13.	translating as a test	Yes No
The teacher and students can use English to:		
14.	check listening comprehension	Yes No
15.	check reading comprehension	Yes No
16.	discuss the methods used in class	Yes No