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ABSTRACT

This article surveys the teaching materials available in the United States for teaching Chinese at the college level. Suggestions are made for the improvement of existing materials and for the development of new ones. The main problems associated with the production and usefulness of language materials are that: (1) languages change through time and therefore materials are quickly out of date; (2) teachers and students vary in goals, temperament, and techniques; and (3) language pedagogy theories are constantly evolving. In addition, intensive courses create a qualitative difference in the need for materials. Academic intensive courses, unlike those offered in the government, must be targeted equally toward speaking and reading. The majority of the students in academic courses are preparing for higher-level research, for which they require reading proficiency in the language. In view of this, although all currently available Chinese materials could stand improvement and updating, reworking priorities should be for materials in the reading phase: (1) introductory general readers, and (2) intermediate short-form character texts especially on culture in Mainland China and updated newspaper readers. The available dictionaries seem to be adequate, but a periodic newsletter would be useful for continually updating the rapidly fluctuating political vocabulary. Recommendations are also made concerning spoken Chinese texts and taped materials. (TL)

Materials for the Study of Chinese

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It is doubtful that we will ever achieve anything like recognized perfection in language materials. Factors effecting language change, especially lexical change, occur often enough to make minor but noticeable differences appear in relative short periods. Also, language teachers and students are so varied in goals, temperment, and technique that it would be impossible to satisfy everyone with one or two texts. Then, too, general language pedagogy continues to develop and new texts are always needed to test these advances.

One could make a cased for continuing production in all phases of language materials and hopefully this will take place, but obviously we can't have everything. There is not enough time, money, or energy to keep such an operation going full time. Unfortunately, there is also the fact that there is too little prestige or compensation for the preparation of language materials for low enrollment courses of the uncommonly taught languages. The result is that priorities must be looked for in an attempt to concentrate available resources on the weakest points in the materials chain.

While I may despair of reaching any agreement, I would still like to propose some suggestions based on ten years of university teaching using chiefly the Yale and De Francis Chinese texts as core materials. More important for forming these opinions has been my last three years as organizer and director of Cornell University's intensive Chinese language program. This type of concentrated approach seems to

create a qualitative difference in needs. It is not just more of the same compressed and speeded up. This type of course puts increased demands on student, teacher, and materials and quickly highlights the weaknesses and gaps in materials while changing one's perspective on course design.

I should point out that although the government and military language schools have been doing this sort of thing for a long time, it is clear that intensive courses in academia are not the same thing. The differences seem minor at first but actually they are significant in the long run. First, the motivation for students in academia must be all carrot and no stick. Seldom do we find any feeling that one's whole future is intimately bound up with performance in the language program. Students are in the course by choice and can always shift back to a less demanding and slower program. We have no control beyond our ability to convince them that they are learning Chinese. There seems to be a clear contrast with the Defense Language Institute and the Foreign Service Institute in this respect.

A second but even more important difference between academic and non-academic intensive programs is the contrast in goals. An academic program must be targeted equally against speaking and reading. The majority of our students are working to prepare themselves for higher level academic research. They must be able to speak the language but they must also be able to do research in the written language. The non-academic language schools may achieve this reading

in two or three intensive years for those students who continue. But in academia we must try to keep an even balance all through the program so that the one semester student is just as well prepared in speaking and reading as his counterpart in any regular paced Chinese course he might enter. We must look upon ourselves as a service organization for other academic institutions and design our courses for earlier and fuller reading components. We work for an equal balance of reading and speaking from the first week.

To many linguists of the audio-lingual persuasion this early reading is heresy. We still get constant argument that our students should be able to speak first then take up reading. While we agree that this might be best in an ideal world it is too slow and too wasteful for today's Asian Studies students. The argument would be stronger with languages having some approximation of a phonetic script, but it weakens as script and phonology diverge. Chinese is the extreme case of minimum feedback between orthography and sound system and, as a result, there is more justification for giving the reading program special status.

In case this sounds like a call for a retreat to the middle ages of language pedagogy, let me hasten to affirm that I strongly support the audio-lingual method. I believe, however, that its strict application to reading skills has been less than beneficial, or more accurately, not optimally successful. With all due respect for the achievements in both speaking and reading under the prestige methods of the 1950's and 60's, there is still no reason why a linguist could not design a program

to achieve optimal control of any or all phases of language skill, reading and/or speaking, in a given amount of time. And we need not restrict ourselves to traditional sequences if needs dictate another course. We know more about the psychology and physiology of reading than we did 10 or 15 years ago, and there is less reason to view it as simply a straight line development of spoken language skills. This is especially true in an ideographic script like Chinese and one weakness of our beginning reading materials derives from a basic misunderstanding of this problem.

The result of all the above thinking is that the major area for reworking our Chinese materials at this time should be in the reading phase, particularly in the elementary texts. We should stop devoting so much of the student time to learning to read conversational Chinese. High frequency conversational vocabulary does not coincide neatly with high frequency newspaper and journal vocabulary. Much too much time and energy is spent learning to read transcriptions of rudimentary speech instead of simplified written materials. For example, about one half of the De Francis Beginning Chinese Reader is conversation and dialogs. This in spite of the fact that the companion volume titled Beginning Chinese is designed to teach the conversational phase. This imbalance is reduced slowly but it continues throughout his Intermediate and Advanced Readers. The rest of his reading text is good and the motivation for selection and repetition of characters is excellent, but the overall effect is something less than an 'honest' reader. I still think his Beginning Reader is the best available but

for academic purposes I would prefer less conversation in the reader, and less time lag between the introduction of a grammatical rule and the appearance of the same rule in the spoken text. We still need a genuine Beginning Reader for Chinese.

At the intermediate reading stage Twenty Lectures in Chinese Culture does a very good job of handling half of the problem. It is an excellent mid-way written Chinese text and it makes good transition between any elementary text and mature, adult Chinese as published in newspapers and periodicals.

However, there is a need for a companion intermediate volume in short form characters and having a Mainland slant. This should definitely not be an attempt to present the most up-to-date Communist jargon and the most recent political slogans. Rather it should be ten to twenty short lessons dealing with Chinese Communist background materials: the Long March, the Yenan period, land reform, reforestation, party and government institutions, etc. Such a book should be as non-political as possible and still use much of the basic store of terms, names, and concepts which every school child knows in China. The mainland texts and teaching materials are unfortunately very weak in pedagogical method and cannot be recommended for classroom use.

At the advanced reading stage a student should be in undoctored written materials and we have plenty of good prepared stuff at this level -- for example, the Mills Reader or the Chi materials on Communism. Also, almost any present day publication would fill the bill here with or without some degree of help in the form of prepared vocabularies

and notes.

Somewhere at the end of the intermediate level there is the need for updated newspaper readers. The Yale texts are getting old now but there is nothing to replace them.

I have discussed written materials first simply because I feel this area has received less serious linguistic attention than the spoken. In my opinion, on any sort of scale of excellence our available spoken texts are better than the available written texts. I also feel that our dictionaries are adequate. Everything could stand improvement and updating, but when faced with priority decisions I would vote to start first on introductory general readers and intermediate short-form character texts.

Here something should be said about the widespread myth that changes on the Mainland have been so extreme that none of today's texts is adequate and that none of our students can communicate with Mainland speakers. It has been seriously suggested that we retire all our texts and start over with new materials for teaching this radically changed and elusive language. In my view, any large effort in this direction would be a mistake of priorities, a potential waste or misuse of time and money, and a reflection of a basic misunderstanding of the language problems motivating this feeling of inadequacy.

In the first place the Mainland changes have been almost exclusively restricted to the very narrow confines of today's political vocabulary. In the phonology, syntax, and perhaps 98 percent of the basic vocabulary there has been not enough change to merit a footnote in any of our acdeptable spoken texts. However, today's political slogans and doctrines

present a continuous rise and fall of new terminology which every Mainland Chinese masters within days of a formal publication or broadcast from Peking. A greatly increased literacy rate coupled with a narrow range of reading matter has combined with pressure toward verbal expression in public and small group sessions. The result has been that almost any Chinese can handle the latest political concepts with ease and at length, while a recent arrival will flounder in a morass of new vocabulary and ideas. No outsider has much serious long-lasting difficulty with this problem, but the initial shock can be traumatic, especially to native speakers and advanced students expecting to understand everything.

I feel that the best help for this problem is not in the form of a brand new language text. Any new text would be out of date at the moment of publication and the constant expense of updating would be prohibitive. Rather I would propose a small periodic publication, possibly in the form of a newsletter, updating current political vocabulary. This would appropriately include new lexicon, capsule explanations of new slogans and themes, and a collection of names and terms which have become obsolete or taboo — using yesterday's vocabulary indiscriminately can be worse than not knowing today's.

In any event, the Mainland Problem is not a top priority consideration in Chinese spoken language teaching, but it will doubtless continue to attract a great deal of enthusiastic attention. I submit that it is not a problem for basic texts but rather an appropriate area for research and special study for the advanced student or [illegible]

prospective traveler who will turn to recent newspapers and broadcasts for the material he needs. There is no other way to keep up-to-date with changes that take place so often and so unexpectedly.

When one examines the spoken Chinese texts in use today the general impression is that beginning texts do not constitute the main problem. Either De Francis or Tewkesbury and Fenn seem adequate for most introductory academic courses. Most of the valid criticisms of these texts come in the form of arguing about details here and there. My chief contribution to such discussions would be the form of a request for the next author of a beginning text to spread the grammar out more evenly and to introduce more difficult grammatical features at an earlier point in the text. There is no reason to save such things as aspect and resultative verbs until the last, and in fact a student would obviously benefit by earlier and longer exposure to such problems.

Also, when new spoken texts are being designed I recommend that they be written with the self-study programs in mind. There are several reasons for this. First, if the book is designed to be used by the unaided beginner, it should be that much more useful when used with a native speaker and/or teacher. Too often a modern text puts so much reliance on the expanations and guidance of a teacher that the average student finds he learns well only when the teacher is right at hand. Tapes and drills are usually written to parrot the text and the text often needs additional explanation. This could be solved by putting an additional tape component with each lesson, material adding something new to the learning process rather than simply reinforcing the textual

material. If the author began with the concept that the student might have to do it all on his own, both tape and text would present a better balanced package. It would also help to level out the individual differences of teachers in terms of experience and ability.

Second, the course and text designed to give maximum help to the student working alone would be of great value in encouraging and improving programs based on self-instruction such as the New York State Critical Languages Program. For the immediate future these programs seem to be the most practical way of spreading Chinese instruction into schools lacking a major Asian languages thrust. These programs should be supported, not as the best possible way to learn a language, but rather as the only way to learn it under certain conditions.

Third, such tapes and texts would be most useful to the student who wants to go over the material as a personal review or refresher course. Obviously we would be better off if special texts and tapes were produced for both self-study and refresher courses. But given the unlikelihood that this could be done very soon, it would seem best to cover all the possibilities with the specially designed text and tape combinations with the self-study student in mind. If necessary, a teachers' guide could give instructions on how best to organize or modify the material for formal classroom use.

One last point as an area in which all the available intermediate and advanced spoken language texts are weak. Too little attention is paid to the point that as a student improves he moves from a sentence building phase into a conversation or discourse building phase. Too often intermediate and advanced spoken texts are merely more of the

same beginning approach — more vocabulary, more artificial dialogs, more grammatical notes — rather than a move into extended discourse, two-way conversations of a longer and more natural kind. At present students who can utter or understand a grammatical sentence still often have trouble uttering or understanding three grammatical sentences in sequence. Texts and tapes can be designed to give increasing practice in this skill, and the language used could and should be more natural than the sterilized conversations of most second and third level texts. I would propose an earlier introduction to actual live conversations, completely unedited but well annotated, as a method to develop the skills and self-confidence needed in unrehearsed, real life situations.

Such a course could be developed as a supplement to one of the present spoken texts. It would require large amounts of recorded spoken material for examination and selection. It would also require a heavy reliance on the tape component, a phase of material development which has been neglected so far. And for obvious reasons. Language pedagogy even now is not entirely free of the feeling that tapes are only a poor substitute for a native speaker. Few teachers or students really understand that tapes do things which no human can do, such as repeat in absolutely identical fashion for an unlimited number of times. A well designed tape component should be part of any spoken language program.

But another reason [illegible] weaknesses of many tape components of present language programs is the fact that good tape programs

design and production is one of the most demanding and at the same time the least rewarding of the materials production process. There is little or no return, either academic or financial, to the author of a tape program. Until we can eliminate the misunderstanding of the value of the tapes and improve the recognition for their production, we cannot reasonably expect a well balanced and efficient spoken program.