A Multiage Approach for Literacy Enhancement of Chinese ESL Students

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Ivy Kwan

> The school must represent present life-life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground.
>
> John Dewey
> Article Two: What The School Is (p. 19)
> My Pedagogic Creed

In this decade of increase diversity, a daunting challenge is the closing of the achievement gap. Diligently, school reforms grapple with ethnic and cultural differences, learning styles, and special needs. A growing English as a Second Language (ESL) student population has created a challenging dilemma in school improvement efforts. My literature review endeavors to examine the struggles of ESL learners with a specific focus on Chinese students. The parameter of this account is guided by my research questions:

How can a multiage ESL approach enhance the literacy of Chinese students?

1. What critical factors impact their learning?

2. What multiage beliefs can support their literacy acquisition?

3. What are the implications of this study?

In the review process, I first consulted research literature related to multiage and ESL learning. After I eliminated data that do not pertain to the sub-questions, I narrowed in on frequently cited authors and sources. Finally as my review took shape, I searched for additional articles to balance my biases. My pragmatic literature review begins with an overview of crucial aspects that affect the literacy acquisition of Chinese ESL students. Next, I explore the multiage age beliefs and situate the approach as an appropriate framework to deliver support for these at-risk learners. To conclude, my appraisal expands on the implications of this review and possible research to further the knowledge on this topic.

The ESL Predicament

Equity for the ESL learner has become a highly contentious educational issue. Educators (Fu, 2004; Cummins, Bismilla, Cohen, & Giampapa, 2006) caution this linguistically and culturally diverse group risks becoming low achievers and eventual dropouts. One U.S. case study details a Chinese student's lack of literacy attainment after two years of pullout ESL assistance (Li & Zhang, 2004). In 2004, 50% of Ontario's ESL students failed on the provincial Grade 10 Literacy Test (Cummins et al, 2006). Gunderson's study of 5,000 ESL high school students in Vancouver reveals 40% of this population dropped out before graduation (Read & Hansen, 2006). After an eight year longitudinal study, Watt and Roessingh assert "graduation remains an elusive goal" for most ESL students (2001, p. 204). In tracking these youths at a Calgary high school, they report a general dropout rate of 74%.

While struggling to make social and economical adjustments, Chinese immigrants frequently experience alienation in a foreign culture (Fu, 1998; Wason-Ellam, 2001). These ESL children are often traumatized by their new educational experiences. Lack of effective communication impacts the efforts of school and family to provide collaborative support for the student to adjust. The parents may have instilled educational values and expectations that are different from that of the school. In addition, the parents are often reluctant to interfere with the professional expertise of teachers (Wason-Ellam, 2001; Li & Zhang, 2004). A U.S. study finds 100% of the Chinese parents surveyed do not participate at their children's schools (Xue, 1995). Preferring the usage of Chinese, peers and family may also impose an environment outside of school that limits the learning and practice of English (Minichiello, 2001). Literacy is foundational to academic success. Gaps in literacy development impede learning in all subjects.

At school, it is difficult for a teacher to balance the “push” for English usage and the respect for a student’s home culture and language (Fu, 1998, p.4). School literacy practices may not correspond with the student’s learning habits. ESL resources may pertain to the ability but not the interests of students. Frequently, learning activities and assessments limit ways students can demonstrate their knowledge and potential (Fu, 2004). When students are unable to adjust to a new setting, they become frustrated and lose confidence over time.

Competing Perspectives

When coping with change, the intertwined efforts of the school, parents, and students are required. Commitment to a shared vision underpins successful transition from one learning culture to another. Collaborative involvement based on understanding is the catalyst that enables students to persist with new academic demands. To grasp the perplexities of the ESL dilemma, stakeholders’ views on the provision of support and literacy attainment are examined.

School

A qualitative study reveals what principals regard as challenges in ESL programming (LaRocuqe, Bonzon, Callendar, Sohbat, & Waterstone, 1999). Some school-based concerns include the lack of professional development for teachers, disruptions from pullout programs, and language problems in home-school communication. However, culturally related barriers are more complex. Educators are divided over problems that involve parental expectations, the usage of heritage or native language during class and or recess, and the fostering of a Canadian identity.

In their study, LaRocuqe et al. (1999) indicate that principals are especially sensitive to contexts where a particular ethnic group such as Chinese is the dominant school population. There are potential problems when beliefs of the majority are not congruent with the dominant

Canadian culture embedded in the curriculum. Administrators are cautious about equity in providing services such as translators or newsletters in one heritage language to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. From the school perspective, ESL programming involves both instructional and structural changes in serving these diverse learners.

Parents

Based on a comparative study of Vancouver immigrant parent and teacher perspectives, Anderson and Gunderson emphasize that schools must accept that ethnic groups have "different ways of knowing and different ways of becoming literate" (1997, p. 514). To bridge the divide, teachers need to honor home literacy beliefs and help parents understand school practices. In their article proposing instructional standards for working with LEP (limited English proficient) students, Beckett and Haley (2000) warn parents are concerned that ESL program may take up classroom time designated for academic learning.

Specifically, findings indicate Chinese parents place high expectations on their children to succeed in school (Lao, 2004; Roessingh, 2006). They value education as means to improve socioeconomic status. Furthermore, these parents strongly support bilingual language acquisition to preserve their Chinese cultural identity and for career advancement (Lao, 2004). Many Asian parents oppose mainstream literacy practices embraced by teachers (Anderson & Gunderson, 1997). They consider the lack of accuracy in strategies such as inventive spelling a detriment to their children's future success. Instead, parents expect teachers to be authoritative and act as the dispenser of factual knowledge. Teachers should immerse students in structured rote learning using tests, workbooks, and plenty of homework. Yet, immigrant parents usually lack knowledge of school practices to provide their children with adequate home support (Roessingh, 2006). The

pressure for achievement in combination with the amount of language learning may become overwhelming to a struggling student.

Students

Interviews with Vancouver Chinese ESL students, however, reveal other facets to their adjustment in a high school culture (Minichiello, 2001). Like the previous studies, this research also notes high parental expectations for obedience and excellence. However, the large Asian community enables the students to cope in Chinese without having to develop their English competence. These youths continue the teen culture by replicating the popular lifestyle and activities of their home country. Consequently, they fail to befriend Canadians and integrate into the dominant culture of the school. Some students claim Canada's belief of pluralism to embrace ethnic diversity is a factor that impedes their social integration and acquisition of English. Minichiello (2001) indicates that although some learners find the ESL program beneficial, others argue the grouping of Chinese speakers together reinforces their tendency to avoid the usage of English. As well, some learners contend ESL placement prevented them from taking academic courses needed for post secondary education.

These studies present compelling perspectives of how ESL learning is restricted for the Chinese students. Teacher training in second language instructional strategies is only one piece to the puzzle. Intercultural communication, relationship building, and awareness must be fostered amongst all stakeholders. Also understanding the nature of the Chinese learner can help inform the provision of ESL assistance.

The Chinese ESL Learner

Profiling ESL studies, Black (2005) asserts mastery of academic English increases the likelihood of an ESL learner to complete high school or to continue at the post-secondary level.

Usually it takes ESL learners two years to become fluent in conversation and to learn decoding skills for reading. However, a minimum of five years is needed for the student to acquire the academic English or cognitive academic language proficiency needed for school (Black, 2005; Cummins et al, 2006). Unfortunately, this condition is seldom addressed in educational planning to ensure continual ESL support. As a result, the ESL learner is disadvantaged. The lack of awareness by the student and parents further aggravates the problem. The family may be misled by conversational fluency as academic competence, or the lack of immediate success as poor student effort.

Barriers

Worse still, many at risk Chinese ESL learners are unidentified. Under the general assumption that only immigrant students need extra assistance, first generation Chinese Canadian children are easily overlooked (Roessingh & Kover, 2002). Often immigrant parents lack sufficient knowledge of English and curricular expectations to help their children with the academic English they needed to succeed. These students may struggle but do not perceive themselves as encountering difficulty as a result of oral language competence. Both the Chinese ESL learners and their families may over estimate their own English proficiency.

Significantly, Edwards (2004) calls for the need to involve the home and community in literacy development. Immigrant families usually develop social networks to access resources, knowledge, and skills. Functional tasks such as correspondence with relatives and filling out forms support literacy in relevant and meaningful ways that do not require books. Schools must value and honor literacy strengths the ESL students bring to school. Although they may differ from the dominant culture, these skills are pertinent to learning. Furthermore, literacy provision that fails to translate curricular expectations to accommodate needs hinders student growth.

Chinese learners often fail to meet the demands of a rigorous literature program (Roessingh & Kover, 2002). From the school perspective, Chinese students are generally stereotyped as motivated high achievers with good work habits (Roessingh & Kover, 2002; Li, 2004). Impressed by their application, teachers may over-rate their academic competence with "goodwill" grades (Roessingh & Kover, 2002, p. 5). From a case study of two struggling middle grade Chinese Canadians, Li (2004) outlines the conflicting cultural values of students, parents, and teachers. Student performance reflects the impact of Chinese usage, literacy practices, homework, home support, and assessment. There is much concern for accuracy such as proper spelling, rote learning, and extra practice. The lack of home and school alignment is problematic.

Learner Preferences

In conducting an action research to nurture autonomous ESL learners, Chan (2000) strives to effect an attitudinal change. Chinese educational institutions have traditionally endorsed an exam-driven learning environment that entails teacher-centered delivery. Accordingly, Chinese students are passive and dependent learners. The findings indicate the participants considered learning tasks that target interaction and collaboration rewarding.

A research on Chinese ESL university students identifies weaknesses in academic skills that impact comprehension (Huang, 2006). These students believe vocabulary, listening, and previewing of text to be important to their understanding. They tend to rely on note taking and memory to aid recall. Their beliefs reflect traditional Chinese learning strategies that differ from than the metacognitive approach prevalent for literacy immersion. As a result, these students may lack engagement and their learning may stay mainly at the factual recall level.

Rather than the rote learning or grammar instruction favored by Chinese learners, experiential learning is a holistic approach to learning. This transformative framework builds on prior knowledge and goal setting to advance learning through real life experiences and reflective application (Knutson, 2003). When ESL students are engaged in task-based or project-based learning, they become motivated and improve their communication skills.

Teaching Beliefs

In contrast, from his professional and personal experiences, Burke (2004) promotes the importance of teaching academic vocabulary to ESL learners. To scaffold learning, he advises using key words, graphic organizers, and modeling in structured, explicit lessons. The teacher also needs to involve ESL students in generating ideas, learning self-help strategies, and collaboration to improve their confidence in reading and writing.

From studies on ESL learning in United States, Black (2005) identifies these to be effective teaching practices: Intensive systematic phonics, word recognition, assessment, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary development across the content areas through daily conversations, stories, and authentic activities. Other means to provide ESL learner support are translators, English-speaking buddies, and paired learning. Increasingly, educators are proposing bilingualism or the use of native language for academic learning (Latham, 1998; Miller & Endo, 2004; Black, 2005; Cummins et al, 2006). Some advocates contend students should not have to halt the learning of content knowledge until they are proficient in English.

In addition, Miller and Endo (2004) caution the possible erosion of the native or heritage language could negatively impact a student's identity to become disconnected from family and culture. They suggest reduction of the cognitive, cultural, and language loads to support ESL students through their "language shock" (p.787, 2004). This anxiety may last for several years

until understanding of English is acquired. Partnership between parents and teacher is critical to student and language growth. By establishing relational trust, the ESL teacher can serve as the mediator to help the students and their parents to make sense of the language learning process (Roessingh, 2006). Such understanding fosters realistic educational expectations and resilience. Effective ESL programming validates learner cultural background and experiences.

Cultural Conflicts

In a reflective self-analysis, Shen (1989) explores the struggle of his Chinese and American cultural identities in his composition. His perspective details the unique political, cultural, and linguistic differences that are depicted in the Chinese discourse. Chinese writing attributes when translated directly as English, could be perceived as odd and confusing by a native English speaker. To reconcile these polarities, a writer must learn to discriminate the writing processes. When writing in Chinese, Shen (1989) assumes the Chinese values, identity, and composition rules. He employs the same awareness when writing in English. The two identities can co-exist.

In another research on cultural identities, Xue (1995) considers the experiences of Chinese immigrant teenagers in their new setting. These youths become alienated due to their limited English, lack of understanding from teachers and parents, maladjustment to the school culture, and inability to make friends. A confused cultural identity and poor academic achievement could result in absenteeism, drop out, or participation in gangs. Interestingly, this study reveals that it is not the educational background of the parents, but a strong relationship with their children that effectively counters the negative pressures. Consequently, the cooperation of community, parents, and schools to support this at risk population is imperative.

For ESL learners, Knutson (2003) believes language mastery is an obstacle that prevents the realization of "social, career-related, or scholastic goals" (p.59). To avoid marginalization of the ESL learners, advocates have proposed funding changes and program restructuring (Watt & Roessingh, 2001; Cummins et al., 2006), ESL teacher training and resources (Li & Zhang, 2004; Cummins et al, 2006), teacher collaboration (Fu, 2004; Cummins et al, 2006), and the integration of home language and culture at school (Zhang, Ollila, & Harvey, 1998; Fu, 2004; Miller & Endo, 2004; Cummins et al, 2006). However, these literacy measures do not address all the factors that impact the academic resilience of the at risk ESL learner. The complexity of literacy acquisition is personal. ESL provision encompasses the dynamics of teaching and learning in a social and cultural context. Usually the ESL student has already developed once successful habitual ways of learning that differ from what is needed for development of cognitive academic competence. Understanding and awareness are needed to reconcile the learning variances. The school and family need to collaborate in responsive ways to assist this vulnerable population. All stakeholders must forge committed trusting relationships to address the divide in ESL learning.

What is the Multiage Alternative?

From their research, Roessingh and Kover (2002) promote the integration of older ESL learners with younger ones to facilitate language and concept development. Multiage interaction enhances the discovery of self-identity. In education reforms, one barrier that continues to impede progress is the traditional structure of graded placement. This practice is both economical and convenient. Yet Goodlad and Anderson (1987) contend that sorting students by chronological age into grades to cover curricular expectations within a given time is detrimental to their academic, social, and psychological growth. Turning from the traditional approach, they pioneered the nongraded concept that eventually evolved into heterogeneous grouping, open

education, and mixed-age grouping (Gaustad, 1992). With many rapid societal changes impacting the educational landscape, the multiage or mixed-age warrants re-visitation as a means to better serve the varying needs of students.

Although mixed-age or multiage programs may differ in implementation, advocates all support the need to recognize student diversity in their development (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Gaustad, 1992; Katz, 1992; Stone, 1994). This grouping practice allows children of varied ages and abilities to learn together. The students make continuous progress according to their interests, needs, and pace (Gaustad, 1992; Stone, 1994). In a study to correlate multiage teaching beliefs and practices, Hoffman (2003) identifies some common accommodations of student differences that foster an environment conducive to cognitive and social development.

Cognitive Advantages of the Multiage Approach

Multiage grouping is oriented on a blend of process approach and constructivist theories to facilitate developmentally appropriate learning (McIntyre et al., 1996; Heins, Tichenor, Coggins, & Hutchinson, 2000). The process approach focuses on a student's developmental process rather than curricular or age standards (Stone, 1994; Yarborough & Johnson, 2000). It embraces a flexible curriculum that encompasses standards and integrated interdisciplinary units based on broad concepts (Heins et al., 2000). Teaching is child-centered to enable the student to achieve to the best of his or her abilities and talents. Learner diversity is accepted and honored.

In the multi-age setting, differentiation of instruction accommodates individual needs to enhance learning. Learning and thinking processes become explicit in open ended tasks to develop metacognitive skills (McIntyre et al., 1996). Centers, theme integration, and journaling foster meaningful engagement in learning experiences (Thomas et al., 2006). Flexible

opportunities for discovery give students choices to become “autonomous learners” (Stone, 1994, p. 104). The ownership of learning increases motivation and self-advocacy.

To complement differentiated instruction, multiage programs use diagnostic learner-focused assessments to depict developmental learning. Individual progress is determined by checklists, portfolios, observations, and anecdotal notes (Heins et al., 2000). In addition, videos, conferences and reports communicate authentic information (Thomas et al., 2006). Such sharing establishes relationships amongst students, teachers, and parents. The multiage approach promotes collaboration, student decisions, and peer-communication of learning. Hall and Hewitt-Gervais (2000) state student self-reflection and evaluation improves motivation. Multiage classrooms facilitate cognitive development by addressing self-improvement and personal expectations rather than grades and competition. Furthermore, the environment advances social learning.

Social Advantages of the Multiage Approach

Vygotsky’s theory for social interaction is embedded in multiage practices to promote individual growth (McIntyre et al., 1996). The variance in age and ability enriches the learning experiences (Gaustad, 1992). Students work as a class, in small groups, or individually to supplement each other’s needs and abilities. Flexible grouping is determined by needs and interests, but not age or ability (Stone, 1994; Hoffman, 2002). Hoffman notes the sharing of “cognitive responsibility” exploits diverse abilities in solving math word problems (p.50, 2002). The multidimensional nature of grouping promotes choice and self-regulation. Using student input, the teacher facilitates relevant classroom contexts (Gerard, 2005). The social environment enables learning that is reciprocal and meaningful.

Subsequently, structured conversations substitute typical teacher and student discourse patterns (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002). Stone (1994) advocates strategies such as modeling, mentoring, and cooperative learning. Methods such as literacy circles entrench interactive roles and activities to scaffold learning (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002). In a multiage community study, Davenport (1998) reports the benefits of inquiry circle in facilitating student involvement, ownership of learning, needs and interest identification, and collaborative problem solving. Students construct knowledge by challenging, clarifying, discussing, and by mutual explicit teaching with peers (McIntyre et al., 1996). Learning structure provides familiarity and routine.

Without yearly grade promotion, students stay together in a stable environment. Long-term friendship improves achievement and attitude. Older students solidify understanding by tutoring. They develop leadership. Young students acquire prosocial skills such as helping, sharing, turn taking, and complex language (Gerard, 2005). Cross-age learning enhances social skills when “cooperation replaces competition” (Stone, 1994, p.104). Group membership enables a learner to learn and interact in that social context (Hoffman, 2003). An examination of ESL learners in service-learning shows improved grades, class participation, confidence, and citizenship (Grassi, Hanley, & Liston, 2004). The study resulted in a lower drop-out rate.

Having a voice in school and community decision making empowers students. They develop better relationships and career skills. Significant improvement in self-determination, the reflective engagement in making choices, is reflected in a case study of multiage students with diverse needs (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002). Self-determination stimulates decision making, problem solving, and self-assessment. Peer interaction provides diverse levels of modeling. The multiage social structure fosters reflective dialogue and collaboration to improve confidence in autonomous learning.

Implications of Multiage Grouping for ESL Learning

Our educational landscape is inundated with ESL studies on pedagogies. Still, the 74% drop-out rate of the Calgary study is alarming. Is the problem rooted in funding, policies, or instructional practices? In his study of at risk students, Glasser (1997) declares students fail because they do not understand how their mind affects the way they behave. Psychologically, they need to belong. They need power, freedom, and fun. When students feel cared for and their interests are recognized, learning improves (Darling-Hammond, 1997). The multiage philosophy informs both the social and cognitive aspects to complement the needs of the Chinese ESL student:

- The community concept provides a social safety net of *relationships*.
- Structured dialogue foster *conversational fluency*.
- Process learning addresses multi-levels of learning. A variety of *entry points* enables the ESL learners to acquire the *academic language* and *basic skills* from prior grades fundamental to closing the gap.
- Cooperative learning accommodates diverse levels of needs. ESL students develop *social and leadership skills*, and acquire *problem solving strategies*.
- Open ended activities allow ESL learners to express prior knowledge and potential to build *confidence*. Learning representation is not limited by lack of English. Choices and decision making promotes *learner autonomy*.
- Diagnostic *assessments* inform *curricular differentiation* and *teaching strategies*. The lack of graded expectations *lessens stress* from labeling and competition.

Acceptance and celebration of diversity foster an inclusive environment. Based on the findings of this literature review, I believe the multiage approach may be reconceptualized to

enable Chinese ESL learners. The multiage developmental orientation is congruent with the timeline required to achieve proficiency in academic English. Process approach, cooperative learning, flexible grouping, differentiated instruction and assessment are strategies that will scaffold these students in their educational pursuit and actualize their potential. A multiage delivery would serve to support English acquisition and help students adjust to the cultural and academic differences.

Reconceptualization

The traditional school structure is resistant to re-engineering (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). However, the multiage framework may be reconceptualized as a language enhancement program to complement “regular” schooling, or as an after school alternative. The design would extend the usage of school facilities and resources to better serve the community. Ideally, this program could be accessed on weekends at a post-secondary institution. The location may also effect a gentle change in attitude. Breeding familiarity could render the prospect of higher education “do-able” to those students who consider such a goal out of reach. The program site, as an incentive and confidence builder, would appeal to both Chinese ESL learners and their parents.

Without the restrictions of grade level accountability, teaching and learning can be more fluid and spontaneous in a multiage literacy enhancement program. A rich, caring learning community can provide home literacy skills that students with busy parents are deprived of. The opportunities for pre-teaching, rehearsal of learning, and homework assistance would facilitate cognitive academic language acquisition. Multiage grouping empowers students to participate both as teachers and learners. Their experiences as second language learners would be invaluable to novice ESL learners. A home simulated structure could entice collaborative efforts from the parents and community. Significantly, the program could serve as a bridge to establish

relationships amongst educators, parents, and students. Reconceptualization of the multiage approach can generate changes to traditional ways of schooling that hinder learning.

Conclusion

I do hope this literature review adds some meaning to future school reform initiatives to help shape education for this rapidly growing population. Perhaps this attempt will provide a platform for conversations and spark research interests in the differentiating of ESL instruction. Numerous factors that influence ESL learning illuminate the need for additional action research. My multiage proposal is limited by the lack of studies targeting the unique needs of the Chinese ESL learners. Within this group, there are unexplored variables such as gender and language dialect differences that may also impact learning. As noted, there are conflicting views regarding how best to assist the Chinese ESL students. Shen's (1989) self-study and some of the findings from Minichiello (2001) contradict the advocacy for bilingualism and use of heritage language (Latham, 1998; Miller & Endo, 2004; Black, 2005; Cummins et al, 2006). There is still much to discover about the correlation between first language interference and fossilization, a condition when established language errors impede learning progress. Obviously, all these deserve attention.

Teacher conducted practitioner research on cultural infusion, relationship building with students and parents, and differentiated instruction are additional areas that merit investigation. Jacobson (1998) posits that practitioner research enhances professional development, invigorates curricular innovation, and contributes to the growth of the teaching profession. When teacher and students are involved in reciprocal construction of meaning and critical reflection, they can align teaching with learning. ESL students have diverse needs. The blanket approach concentrating on English learning only can no longer suffice. Differentiated practices that reflect student needs are

means to facilitate school improvement. Effective schools cultivate a responsive environment that enhances the academic resilience and self-efficacy of the ESL students. Equitable reform must penetrate the superficiality of teaching strategies and policies to address human needs. As Watt and Roessingh assert, the dilemma of the ESL drop-outs will translate into "lost human and educational capital" (2001, p.219). Unless the social and cultural realities of our students are addressed with inclusive and respectful engagement, academic adjustment is unlikely to happen.

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