

## Teacher development in China: A study of pedagogical training in TCFL\*

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**Abstract:** This paper on pedagogical training of TCFL (Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language) programs is based on the author's five-week study in the summer of 2008 at six Chinese universities. Based on class observations, interviews of teachers and students, and documents provided by the six universities, the author has found that their curriculum for pedagogical training is insufficient; theory and practice are often disconnected due to insufficient hands-on experience; and the training for cross-cultural communication skills needs to be improved.

**Key words:** pedagogy; TCFL; MTCSOL; Hanban

### 1. Introduction

Chinese language education is undergoing unprecedented development in K-12 schools across the United States because of rapid economic growth in China and increasing investment in language education from both the United States and Chinese governments. For example, in Ohio, the number of schools or districts with Chinese programs increased nearly ten times, and student enrollment increased by thirteen times in just four year<sup>1</sup>. Such dramatic growth presents great opportunities as well as challenges. One of the challenges is the lack of qualified teachers. Qualification here means both the license to teach in public schools and the competence to teach American students whose first language is not Chinese. According to the teacher development experience at the Ohio State University (OSU), one of the leading institutions in Chinese language teacher training, an important solution to this challenge is to tailor pedagogical training to suit American K-12 learners. With support from OSU and Hanban (Chinese Language Council International), the author visited six Chinese universities in the summer of 2008 to examine how pedagogical training is conducted in preparing TCFL (Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language) teachers at universities with MTCSOL (Master of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages) programs. The six universities are: Beijing Normal University (BNU), Northeast Normal University (NENU), East China Normal University (ECNU), Nanjing Normal University (NNU), Nanjing University (NJU) and Yunnan Normal University (YNU).

This report is based on Internet research, class observation, interviews of teachers and students, as well as documents provided by the programs under study. Based on data and research, this report offers recommendations

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\*Due to the publisher's needs, this paper is published in No. 8 instead of No. 6.

The present study was supported by Hanban and OSU Chinese Flagship Program. Since this report was submitted in October 2008, Hanban has adopted some of the recommendations offered in the report, such as increasing the weight of course credits in pedagogical training and practicum. During the same period, the OSU Chinese Flagship Program collaborated with Hanban's Division of Teachers in providing a "training of trainers" summer institute in July 2009 in Qingdao. More collaborative efforts in pedagogical training are expected.

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<sup>1</sup> From 2005-2006 to 2008-2009 school years, the number of Ohio K-12 schools or districts operating Chinese language programs increased from 8 to 72; and student enrollment increased from 490 to an estimated 6,500. More information is available at <http://k12chineseflagship.osu.edu>.

to improve pedagogical training of TCFL teachers.

## 2. A comparison of the MTCSOL courses and credits

Based on the information collected and summarized in Table 1, all six universities have met the credit and course requirement set by Hanban and the MTCSOL Committee.

**Table 1 A comparison of courses and credits of the MTCSOL programs<sup>2</sup>**

MTCSOL standards		BNU	NENU	ECNU	NNU	YNU	NJU
Course requirement	Credit	Credit	Credit	Credit	Credit	Credit	Credit
2 basic courses	8	8	8	8	8	8-11	8
5 required courses	10	10	10	10	12	10	12
5 elective courses	10	10	10	10	8	10	8
Practicum	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Total credits required	32	32	32	32	32	32-35	32

According to the collected MTCSOL plans, all six universities have met the Hanban requirement for MTCSOL programs in terms of pedagogical courses and credits: a total of four credits in two courses (i.e., methods of teaching Chinese as a second language and the study of classroom teaching). There are four additional credits for practicum, however, the universities under study implemented practicum somewhat differently, which will be elaborated in the section below regarding class observations. In some universities, the number of hours which comprises each credit varies, particularly in the “basic courses” (e.g., foreign language and politics). Furthermore, many universities lack pedagogical course options within the “elective courses”. However, the course list provided by Hanban (or MTCSOL) has a number of elective pedagogical courses.

In addition to the MTCSOL programs sponsored by Hanban, individual universities also have their own M.A. (Master of Arts) program of TCFL. Based on the M.A. curricula collected from three universities, both the MTCSOL and M.A. programs share similar goal of training TCFL teachers, but the latter has even less emphasis on pedagogical training, and has weaker requirements for practicum<sup>3</sup>.

East China Normal University, Nanjing University and Nanjing Normal University also recruit K-12 teachers of Chinese from the United States (They are mostly heritage speakers or Chinese Americans). The teachers in training spend three summers in China taking classes and complete assignments online for a total of 33-35 credits. Finally, they submit a thesis and are awarded a M.A. degree. Part of the cost for this program is provided through Hanban. According to the curricula provided by Nanjing University and Nanjing Normal University<sup>4</sup> as well as class observation at East China Normal University, such M.A. programs focus heavily on delivering linguistic and cultural knowledge, and little attention is paid to pedagogical issues encountered by American students whose native language is not Chinese.

In comparison, pedagogy is a major component in training K-12 Chinese language teachers in the United

<sup>2</sup> Sources: “Curriculum Guide for Master of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (MTCSOL)” (in Chinese, retrieved from <http://www.mtcsol.org/pyfa.asp>) and paper copies of MTCSOL curriculum plans from Beijing Normal University, Northeast Normal University, East China Normal University, Nanjing Normal University, Yunnan Normal University and Nanjing University.

<sup>3</sup> Sources: M.A. curriculum plans for TCFL students from Northeast Normal University, Nanjing Normal University and Yunnan Normal University.

<sup>4</sup> Sources: M.A. curriculum plans for American K-12 Chinese language teachers from Nanjing Normal University and Nanjing University.

States. For example, in the past three years, the Ohio State University has completed a year-long Chinese Teacher Alternative Licensure Program. The trainees are native speakers or non-heritage speakers of Chinese. They are required to take 36 credits in one calendar year (four quarters), of which 33% are pedagogy courses and 50% for practicum<sup>5</sup>. During the last decade, the OSU Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures has operated a seven-week intensive summer institute for teacher training, under the title of Summer Program of East Asian Concentration (SPEAC). It provides 15 graduate credits, of which all are concentrated on pedagogy and practicum<sup>6</sup>. The OSU K-12 Chinese Flagship Program provides in-service workshops each quarter for current teachers of Chinese, which are focused on pedagogical issues<sup>7</sup> (A summary of the above is in Table 2). Emphasis on pedagogy in teacher development is based on years of experience at the Ohio State University studying effective ways of teaching American students. According to the information available so far, the MTCSOL and other TCFL programs of the Chinese universities should focus on strengthening their curricula in the areas of pedagogy and practicum.

**Table 2 A comparison of Hanban and OSU programs in pedagogy and practicum**

Program	Total credits	Pedagogy credits	Total credits (%)	Practicum credits	Total credits (%)
MTCSOL of Hanban	32	4	12	4	12
OSU teacher licensure	36	12	33	18	50
OSU-SPEAC	15	8	53	7	47
OSU K-12 Chinese flagship workshops	Focus on pedagogy and teaching resource sharing				

### 3. Reflections of class observation

The author observed classes both in person and through video at the aforementioned six universities. Classes observed at four of the universities were related to pedagogy. Beijing Normal University and Yunnan Normal University used their own faculty to teach pedagogy; they emphasized task-based method and the importance of “learning through doing”. The pedagogy course in the East China Normal University was taught by a high school teacher of Chinese arranged through the Confucius Institute of the New York-based China Institute. The class appeared to be lively and effective. However, due to numerous restrictions, such as too many students in one classroom, the students were mostly passive listeners instead of “learning through doing”. Usually, the students (teacher trainees) understood what the teacher (trainer) said, but often were at a loss when delivering a real lesson. This problem is partially caused by insufficient hours for the pedagogy course. The teachers had to rush to complete the course content within the limited time, thus creating a teacher-centered learning environment.

The majority of pedagogy classes mentioned above consisted of teachers explaining how to teach, but there was little hands-on practice or step-by-step demonstration on how a class is instructed. The common practice of classroom teaching is theory-based, while actual practicum takes place in the second year of the program (increasingly more teacher trainees travel beyond China for practicum). The Chinese should be familiar with the concepts of “Theory must be combined with practice” and “Practice makes true knowledge”, both of which have been used as popular political jargons in China. They should apply these guiding principles when designing and implementing pedagogy courses.

<sup>5</sup> Source: [http://www.fcesc.org/license/brochure2008\\_chinese-japanese.pdf](http://www.fcesc.org/license/brochure2008_chinese-japanese.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Source: <http://deall.osu.edu/programs/summerPrgm/speac.cfm>.

<sup>7</sup> Source: <http://k12chineseflagship.osu.edu>.

Whether a pedagogy course is effective depends on a number of factors, specifically, if a curriculum is developed for speakers whose native language is not Chinese, and if sufficient time is allotted for practice. The pedagogical courses developed by OSU for TCFL teachers closely combine theory and practice. For example, the seven-week teacher development summer institute is operated in conjunction with a class of high school students who are beginners in Mandarin Chinese. It requires teacher trainees to not only take theory and hands-on courses, learn through the performance-based and behavioral culture-centered approach, but also observe the ongoing high school Chinese class taught by a master teacher. They are also required to tutor the student learners and deliver a real lesson at the end of the program. Most of the teacher trainees are native speakers of Mandarin Chinese, but they have limited experience teaching Chinese to American students. Throughout the seven-week training, they reported undergoing a transformational experience as well as greater confidence in class, with vast improvement in their teaching and student learning as a result.

#### **4. Feedback from teachers and students**

During the visits to the six universities, the author interviewed both teachers (trainers) and students (teacher trainees) regarding pedagogical issues, and completed a brief survey of students at three of the universities.

Responses from the teachers are summarized as follows:

(1) Pedagogy is vital for teacher training, but due to limited instructional hours, it is difficult to find time to do hands-on practice.

(2) Many students had experience teaching at Chinese schools or colleges. They tend to think that their teaching experience can be applied to the non-native speakers who study Chinese.

(3) Most students and teachers are still used to the teaching method of transferring content knowledge to students. Such method is easier for planning and delivering lessons, but it would lead to teacher-centered class environment.

(4) Because theory and practice are not combined in the classroom (practicum experience targeting at K-12 non-heritage students, if there is any, usually takes place in the second year of the program), the teacher trainees often regard the limited and unreal practice as childish, thus lacking motivation for preparation and participation.

The author conducted a brief survey of the MTCESOL students (teacher trainees) at Beijing Normal University, Yunnan Normal University and the summer institute students at the Northeast Normal University. The results show that only a small number of them had taught Chinese to speakers of other languages studying in China, and far fewer of them had taught Chinese outside of China. When asked what areas of training were considered crucial to teaching Chinese at American K-12 schools, the responses were varied and are summarized in Table 3.

The teacher trainees stated their desire to have the opportunity to teach Chinese outside of China. According to the responses in Table 3 and interviews, the student feedback are summarized and ranked as follows:

(1) The students (teacher trainees) want to learn more and have hands-on experience of the teaching methods that fit American students.

(2) They hope to improve their English proficiency and cross-cultural communication skills.

(3) Their goal is to learn more about K-12 schools in the US as well as the “minds and behaviors” of the American students.

(4) They want to improve their skills in Chinese language and culture.

(5) They hope to enhance their adaptive skills in American schools and society.

**Table 3 Areas of training needed the most by students (teacher trainees)**

Areas of Needs	BNU		NENU		YNU	
	# replied	%	# replied	%	# replied	%
Pedagogy	15	65	10	59	46	87
English language and communication skill	9	39	10	59	17	32
Chinese language and culture	0	0	6	35	10	19
School and social adaptive skills in the US	5	22	2	12	8	15
Understanding of psychology of K-12 students	7	30	7	41	11	21
N (Total respondents) <sup>8</sup>	23		17		53	

According to the feedback from teacher trainers and trainees, pedagogical training in TCFL is the most important to language teaching. However, pedagogical training only consists of 12 percent of the total course credits in the MTCSOL program, far less than the credits given to Chinese culture courses<sup>9</sup>. Based on the survey and interviews conducted in the six universities, teacher trainers and trainees in the MTCSOL programs want to enhance their pedagogical training. According to the feedback from Hanban guest teachers as well as locally hired teachers in Ohio schools, pedagogical training is both practical and useful in their work. In fact, they stated that pedagogical training is more useful than many of the theory and culture courses<sup>10</sup>. The OSU Chinese language teacher development experience indicates that sufficient pedagogical training is vital to the future success of teacher trainees. Due to this fact, OSU pays special attention to pedagogical training and hands-on experience.

Interestingly, only a small number of students express the need to enhance their adaptive skills in American schools and society. However, based on the author's experience with the Hanban guest teachers in Ohio, most of them need additional training in acclimating to a new culture, including skills in dealing with inter-cultural conflicts. For some, the limited adaptive skills combined with personality issues have become greater challenges than the lack of pedagogical training, causing hardships to them as well as others around them.

## 5. Recommendations

According to the above feedback and observations, fundamental changes need to take place in order to improve pedagogical training in Chinese universities. The concept of "student-centered learning" is not new among Chinese educators, particularly in the area of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. However, the Chinese learning environment is still heavily teacher-centered, focusing on the transfer of content knowledge. To the American students who are beginning Chinese learners, the most effective method of teaching Chinese should focus on the learners themselves. Teachers should play the role of a coach, and the measure for successful teachers is the performance of their students. In other words, whether a class is well delivered is based on how much the students have learned and performed in a culturally appropriately manner, not on the volume of content delivered by the teacher.

<sup>8</sup> The combined number in each category of Table 3 is larger than the total number of respondents because each respondent can choose multiple items.

<sup>9</sup> Source: *Curriculum guide for master of teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages*. Retrieved from <http://www.mtcsol.org/pyfa.asp>. (in Chinese)

<sup>10</sup> The OSU K-12 Chinese Flagship Program provided seven in-service teacher workshops in the last three years. According to their evaluation feedback, most of the teacher participants hope to receive more pedagogical training in order to improve their teaching and student learning.

There may be different ways to improve pedagogical training of TCFL teachers, but there is only one condition to make it successful: designing the training according to the needs of non-heritage learners, combined with sufficient observation and practicum. Based on the study of the six universities and three years of experience promoting Chinese language in Ohio's K-12 schools, the author offers the following recommendations to Hanban and universities with MTCSOL programs:

(1) Increasing the number of credits for pedagogical training (to one third of the total required course credits);

(2) Improving the design of pedagogical courses to meet the needs of American (or other countries specific) K-12 students, and giving sufficient attention to practice or "learning by doing";

(3) Enhancing training in cross-cultural communication and conflict management skills, as well as adaptive skills in American (or other countries specific) schools and society;

(4) Strengthening the capacity of providing ongoing pedagogical training to the volunteer teachers by requiring additional commitment from the teacher-hosting party of the country.

There is a saying which attests to the need for qualified teachers: "It does not help to have good teaching materials without qualified teachers; however, a competent teacher can make a class thrive even without sufficient instructional material". In a word, training a large contingent of competent teachers who can function properly in American (or other country specific) K-12 schools is the key to a healthy development of Chinese language programs. To reach this goal, it is essential to strengthen pedagogical training. When each K-12 Chinese classroom has a qualified (licensed) and competent teacher, it will be the day for all Chinese language program to thrive.

(Edited by Nicole and Lily)