

Chinese Language Teaching in a Saudi Context: A brief review

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Abstract

While English remains the predominant language with prestigious status, which is highly valued throughout the world, other languages are also of paramount importance. For example, interest in teaching the Chinese language as a foreign or second language has increased both inside and outside China for historical, political, and economic reasons. Chinese has become an international and global language and millions of foreign students learn it to compete in the business market. Chinese language enjoys special attention from Saudi decision-makers. Recently, some selected schools introduced Chinese to Saudi students for the first time in 2019. When teaching any foreign language, many problems occur in the teaching and learning process. Some of these problems are caused by psychological, cognitive factors, or individual variables. Others are related to teaching practices and curriculum designs. As teaching Chinese as a foreign language is relatively new in Saudi Arabia, there is a lack of official documents dealing with this issue and few studies have addressed this as a research topic. This brought us neatly to the necessity of producing more researches in this respect. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to lessen the gap and provide an overview of introducing Chinese language to Saudi students as a foreign language (CFL). It seeks to present some notes and indications of the inclusion of teaching Chinese in the Saudi educational system. It will discuss the possible problems to be encountered in light of the current situation and literature review, and finally, some recommendations and implications for further research are given.

Keywords: Overview, Chinese language, Saudi students

1. Introduction

While English continues to be the most dominant language with prestigious status all over the world for historical, political and economic reasons, recently, there has been a growing interest in teaching Chinese language as a foreign or a second language inside and outside China (Moloney and Xu, 2015, Ma et al., 2017, Wen and Jiang, 2018), and because of political and economic reasons, Chinese has become an

international and global language (Li, 2020). The economic rise of Chinese can be observed in the booming of productions of goods, services and technological advancements. For these reasons, millions of students learn it because this will open up more opportunities for them to get better jobs and to compete in the business market (Goh and Wu, 2017). Moreover, Chinese language is an official UN language besides English, French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic due to its influential political power in the world.

Studying another foreign language fall into the term second language acquisition. L2 acquisition is defined by Ellis(2010, p. 3) as..... “the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside and outside of a classroom, and ‘ Second Language Acquisition’ (SLA) as the study of this”.

According Ellis (2010) L2 acquisition is not limited to second language, but it might refer to studying a foreign language and it can refer as well to the learning of third or fourth languages. When learning any foreign language, by definition students have already acquired their mother tongue as a first language. This might be an advantage in the sense that students’ prior knowledge of how a language works can facilitate learning the second language. On the other hand, students’ mother tongue might be a problem if students transfer some rules or previous guesses because this might inhabit learning the target language (Savvidou, 2020). Another important interest in SLA research is the psychological factors associated with the need to select what constitute a good language learner such as age, intelligence, motivation and cognitive style (Li et al., 2022). However, the lack of research and documentations about teaching Chinese is more evident in Saudi Arabia. This might be attributed to the new experience of Chinese in Saudi education system. Therefore, this study aims at addressing this important issue.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teaching foreign languages in Saudi Arabia

English language teaching in Saudi Arabia is back to 1950s. it was introduced to students as a compulsory school subject for intermediate and high school students (Alshammari, 1984). In 2010, students at elementary schools started to learn English as English enjoys a special status in the society.

Over the past 50 and till present, an abundant amount of studies have dealt with teaching and learning English as a foreign language. These studies have been published in local or international journals (Moskovsky and Picard, 2018). Some of these studies come into the form of master or PhD dissertations. It is taught as a foreign language to Saudi students starting from first grade.

In addition to English language teaching, some prestigious international schools teach other foreign languages such as French and Spanish. As part of the collaboration between Saudi Arabia and China, Saudi Arabia signed a mutual cooperation agreement in the field of cultural and educational exchange in 2006. In 2007, the ministry of higher education sent some students to purse their studies in China via the government scholarship programme. However, the majority who

graduated from Chinese university were specialized in engineering and information technology not as teachers to teach Chinese as a foreign language. King Saud university took the lead and started the first bachelor degree programme to teach Chinese to 30 male students in 2009 after signing an agreement with Confucius Institute which is funded by Chinese ministry of education to promote Chinese learning and teaching locally and internationally and facilitate cultural exchanges (Gil, 2017). The institute would develop Chinese language courses, provide teachers with proper training, design curricula and launch examination sites. In 2019, more Saudi universities started offering bachelor degree programmes to teaching Chinese like King Abdulaziz university and Jeddah university, which signed agreements with the same institute. Other universities offered diplomas and run several workshops like Immam university and university of Tabuk. In the first stage and in 2019, the ministry of higher education selected four high schools in Riyadh to teach Chinese, two in Al khobar and two in Jeddah. In a later stage, the ministry is planning to include female high schools to teach Chinese as well.

2.2 Teaching Chinese language for foreign learners

Chinese language has been learnt and studied inside and outside mainland China as a second or foreign language. Teaching Chinese as a foreign language started in the 1980s and 1990s which is relatively new. Nowadays more and more students are enrolled in classes not only at colleges as adult learners, but also at elementary, intermediate and high schools, with different purposes and needs. As a result, Chinese has become an interesting topic that attracts the attention of linguists and researchers from different disciplines such as linguistics, second language acquisition, education and so on (Li, 2020). According to Orton and Scrimgeour (2019), teaching Chinese for foreign students should take into account the analysis and description of the target language in use as well as the mother tongue of learners, how learning meet students' needs and finally what are the skills and strategies teachers should be equipped with. They elaborated that teaching resources is another concern taught to foreign students are so artificial because they are so artificial and intended to produce perfect Chinese as a final goal. These resources do not consider students' level and take gradual move in difficulty to achieve that goal (Orton and Scrimgeour, 2019).

In Saudi Arabia, there are few studies tackling Chinese teaching. In one study, Alshammari (2020) carried out a study on a sample of Saudi English language learners and curriculum designers to examine their views of potential challenges of teaching Chinese in Saudi Arabia. The findings yielded that the majority of students considered Chinese a very difficult language to learn. Also their lack of the Chinese language led them to have low motivation and aptitude. For curriculum designers, they all agree that it would be beneficial to implement traditional classrooms i.e., face-to-face interaction and focus on teaching grammatical rules and memorizing words. this made them hesitant to utilize technological advancements like online classes to teach at the beginning. They preferred to delay this till students acquire the basic of the target language. Finally, they suggested a full collaboration with the

ministry of education when designing books to ensure the content appropriateness to the Saudi culture and make sure it take students' needs into consideration.

2.3 Researches on Chinese as a foreign language

Generally speaking, conducting researches is essential to inform teachers about their teaching practices and therefore facilitate learning for students. In Chinese context, dearth in experimental researches into Chinese language acquisition as first or additional language would affect the process of teaching Chinese and therefore affect catering for students' cognitive and linguistic needs (Wen and Jiang, 2018, Sung ,2019, Wen, 2020). this has impact on Chinese language teaching and negatively affects the nature of learning processes.

Another concern has to do with the nature of conducted researches. According to Ma et al., (2017) much of the research related to teaching Chinese language is carried out by Chinese researchers and published in Chinese journals. This might lead Chinese researchers and other researchers outside China not to share their findings and contributions. Gong et al., (2018, p. 278), clarifies this as "Unfortunately, given researchers' imbalanced proficiency in English and Chinese, there have been limited exchanges among researchers who publish their works in Chinese and those who publish in international journals".

However, many areas of research has been investigated by researchers utilizing different research designs and related to foreign Chinese language teaching. For example, Gong et al., (2018) did a systematic review study to examined published articles related to teaching and learning Chinese language locally and internationally from 2004 to 2016. The findings revealed that while mainland China researchers focused on issues concerned with teachers' professional development, their counterpart researchers were interested in students' related issues such as students' variations and language learning. They concluded that more cross-cultural studies and team work effort were needed to fill in the gap in the researched areas. In another setting, LYU and Qi (2020) conducted a review study to examine the implementation of technologies in teaching Mandarin Chinese as a second or a foreign language. This review was based on studies published outside China and covered the period from 2008 to 2018. The findings revealed that technology assisted students in different ways including in ceasing their motivation to learn, offering more authentic materials that helped them to be immersed in the target culture, and finally offering more experiences that enabled them to increase their language performance. Nevertheless, the results found that most studies were published in foreign language environment such as United States, United Kingdom and Australia while there were few published in Singapore or Malaysia where Chinese is regarded as a second language. In a similar study, Zhou and Wei (2019) examined the role of technology to increase students' vocabulary by utilizing internet-based games. They found that such games increased students' motivation and learning autonomy. Also students were more engaged in the learnt materials when working in a competitive environment.. In the same respect, Luo et al., (2022) investigated the effect of implementing advanced technological tools to teach Chinese via virtual reality games. The findings conclude that technology allowed online interactive interactions

among both students and teachers. It also provided students with corrective feedback and enabled adult beginner students to be immersed in the Chinese culture. On the other hand, online courses is another way showing how technology can enhance learning. According to Liu, (2022), online Chinese learning classes received little attention before the Covid 19 pandemic, after the pandemic outbreak remote Chinese learning and teaching classes were delivered. This interest has led researchers to publish many studies to show the advantages and disadvantages of such mode of learning. The advantages have been reported by both teachers and students that inform stakeholders to consider this when making future learning programmes.

Having said that, Cai (2022) however, pinpoints that using advanced technology to teach Chinese does not go without problems. He maintains that due to the abundance of learning materials in online situations, learners have to improve other learning skills especially listening skills to grasp the learnt resources.

Some studies have to do learners' characteristics and some learning problems. For example, Willis (2018) investigated teachers' beliefs who were native Chinese teaching foreign students in the US, about teaching Chinese literacy as a foreign language. It was found that teachers were influenced by traditional Chinese model of teaching Chinese, meaning retaining many features of Chinese learning literacy. Such model conceptualizes reading as a bottom down process, focusing on decoding and follows a teacher-centered approach to learning. On the other hand, teachers who learnt in the US were more inclined to implement top down process approach to learning which conceptualize reading as a whole process, focusing on what students already know about the text and bring to read material and it follows a student-centered approach to learning. Finally, the study emphasized the need to provide students with more authentic materials as a way to give students more exposure to Chinese language and culture. With respect to areas of problems in Chinese teaching, there is a small number of studies on teaching Chinese characters to foreign students and about the effective methods (Sung, et al., (2019). Chen (2021) carried out a study to examine students' self-efficacy and its relation with their possession of good characteristics of good language learners. The study concluded that although there was no association between students' self-efficacy and good characteristics, students were aware of their areas of strengths and weakness of learning Chinese and conscious of multiple challenges of learning the target language. Moreover, students had positive attitudes toward learning Chinese and its people that led to increase their motivation to learn and practice the language in Chinese-speaking situations. One of the most challenges encountering foreign learners of Chinese is handling Chinese characters. Unlike other languages like English which uses alphabets in the writing system, Chinese uses logographic characters to represent its writing system (Li and Yang, 2018). Zikipi (2019) also stresses on the importance of increasing the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of students toward learning Chinese. One thing that teachers can do to increase students' motivation is by telling them about the important role of that Chinese play in the globalizing world. Chinese can help them to find future job in competitive business marketplace. On the other hand, teachers can attend to students' intrinsic

motivation by providing them with materials that meet their needs and love to learn. In this sense, internal rewards are deriving students' motivation (Zikipi , 2019).

Finally, related to the language skills, Cai (2022) observes that L2 Chinese listening is regarded as the most difficult skill to teach and learn from students part. Although it is important for L2 learners to master it in order to be able to improve their abilities in other language skills, it is the least area that has been researched. It has also given the least amount of time in classrooms for students to learn. It is not surprising then to no appropriate teaching materials nor suitable teaching strategies.

3. Implications and recommendations for further research

This study provided an overview of introducing Chinese language to Saudi students as foreign language (CFL). It was found that there was no single study carried out to investigate how teaching and learning Chinese work in Saudi schools with Chinese learners and teachers. Based on the review of previous research, the following implications and recommendations that would inform teaching and learning Chinese as well as research are valid to be taken into account.

First, it seems that there are many potential challenges associated with teaching and learning Chinese to Saudi students according to the literature review. Some of these challenges are related to teaching issues while others have to do with learners' characteristics. Gong et al., (2018). The main obstacle mentioned was teaching the unique features of Chinese characters. Other obstacles include teaching the four language skills and lack of exposure to practice the target language or their aptitude to learn the language. To attend to these obstacles, many suggested solutions can be taken into considerations. One is that it might be worthy to incorporate Chinese language courses into online courses as integral part of curriculum. This will give room for students to be exposed to the language and listen or speak with native speakers of Chinese. According to Liu, (2022). Another solution is the resort to the mother tongue of students to facilitate learning. Students are beginners and need any kind of support to familiarize themselves with the basics of Chinese but L1 or L2 should be kept to the minimum. Although it is common to use L1 to facilitate L2, it is less common to use L2 to teach and learn L3, teachers can benefit from L2 i.e., English to teach students who have good command of L2.

On the other hand, It is important to consider the role of the beliefs teachers hold both tacit and explicit when teaching Chinese (Willis, 2018). Teaching is conceptualized as a complex process and it has many dimensions that guide teaching practices inside classrooms. Teachers' beliefs is one of these dimensions that underlie teachers' actions. For Saudi Chinese language teachers, they might be influenced by the best practices of teaching of Arabic literacy to students for instance but do they all have the same beliefs. Can Saudi teachers who graduated from Saudi universities hold different beliefs from Saudi teachers who graduated from Chinese universities ?. For this reason, teachers need to collaborate and work with each other and report their problems that they encounter while teaching and share their beliefs about teaching. They can seek the help of researchers to find solutions to their problems in this respect. (Gong et al., 2018, Ma et al., 2017).

Second, another important implication of this paper is the question of how far researchers can benefit from available research findings associated with teaching and learning English as a foreign language (Moskovsky and Picard, 2018). It was proposed earlier that lack of research on Chinese as a foreign language will affect the process of teaching and learning it (Wen, 2018, Sung, 2019, Wen, 2020). This shows the importance of taking benefit from research on English language teaching. Much if not all the research carried out in Saudi Arabia, related to teaching a foreign language dealt with topics related to English language teaching. It might be useful in the sense that both English and Chinese are taught as foreign languages and fall into the field of second language acquisition, but many factors have to be concerned. For example, examining the motivation factor that derive learners to learn either English or Chinese is needed (Zikipi, 2019). Those who study English as a compulsory school subject and have more exposure to it will not have the same motivation of those studying Chinese as an optional course and have limited exposure to practice it. In one study, it is mentioned that Saudi learners had a low motivation toward learning Chinese because they saw it a very difficult language (Alshammari, 2020).

Here it comes the need to collaborate with Chinese researchers to deepen understanding of methods implemented to teach Chinese with international students and ways to best grasp Chinese culture. Researchers can conduct cross-cultural studies to systematically examine the characteristics of learners and comparisons between the two cultures. Universities are good start like King Saud university which has access and collaboration with some Chinese universities.

Third, as the experience of teaching Chinese is relatively young in Saudi Arabia and internally (Li, 2020), the question of how much time is needed to assess this experience is yet to be answered. Will be enough for those in charge to depend on continuous assessment or result gained from examination sites? Indeed there are more to assess such as teachers programmes, the appropriateness of contents in meeting students' needs, teaching practices, in-service teacher training programmes and so on. Many parties should contribute to assess this experience starting from ministry of education and ending with students.

Finally, If the ministry is planning to expand the experience of teaching Chinese as it has been announced, this requires recruiting thousands of male and female Chinese teachers. This would not be possible in the near future but it can be achieved in the long run. Universities have to accept more students in their programmes and the government scholarship programmes should include L2 Chinese teaching major in its plan. Colleges can offer diploma programmes and run workshops to train teachers as part of continuous professional development.

4. Conclusions

This review shed light on the recent experience of introducing Chinese to the Saudi students for the first time. The findings revealed that there was a lack of official documents dealing with this issue and few studies have addressed this as a research topic in the Saudi context. It also showed that problems associated with teaching Chinese were almost the same as teaching any foreign language including psychological factors and less exposure to the target language. But in teaching

Chinese there were some barriers related to teaching the unique nature of Chinese characters. Others were related to the teachers' readiness to teach Chinese. This included their prior knowledge and how their beliefs about teaching a foreign language might affect their teaching. Some solutions were offered from the literature to facilitate Chinese learning such as the implementation of technology and the resort to the mother tongue of students. Finally, findings indicated that teaching Chinese cannot happen all of a sudden and it needs thorough planning to prepare a suitable ground for integrating it into the curriculum. All parties should work collaboratively involving students, teachers, and policymakers to plan, improve and assess the experience of teaching and learning. The private sector can contribute as well by opening more Chinese language institutes and recruiting native speakers of Chinese.

5. References

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