12.

多元背景中文班的测试设计
Test Design for Multi-background Mandarin Classes

曲延风博士，加拿大昆特兰理工大学(Kwantlen Polytechnic University)

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to address a common issue encountered in the Mandarin Chinese classes at Canadian universities in big cities: students of diverse linguistic backgrounds are often pooled together in one class for lack of resources. Instructors of such multi-background classes are confronted with three challenges: What constitutes a fair assessment for a class with a diverse background? How to encourage non-heritage students to continue in their study of one of the most truly challenging languages? How to avoid exceeding the University quota for a limited percentage of As allowed in one particular class? Based on a detailed profiling of such classes, this paper first analyzes the learning strengths of both the heritage and non-heritage groups of learners and then proposes some specific testing strategies while taking full advantage of the learner strengths of the non-heritage students in the area of PINYIN and grammar learning. Repeated use of these testing strategies over the years has proven that they are effective in successfully addressing the challenges facing instructors of multi-background Mandarin classes at metropolitan Canadian universities.

1. The Issue

Canada is a multi-cultural society and this is particularly true of some Canadian metropolises like Metro Vancouver. While it is laudable to see people of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds live and work in harmony in society at large, it is a different matter to achieve that harmony in a Mandarin class where students of various backgrounds, linguistic and cultural, to converge to study allegedly one of the 'hottest', yet hardest, languages of the world. That is because there are some challenges confronting university Mandarin instructors and here are some of the specific issues:

- What constitutes a fair assessment for a class with a diverse background?

- How to encourage non-heritage students to continue in their study of one of the most truly challenging languages?

- How to avoid exceeding the University quota for a limited percentage of As allowed in one particular class?

This paper is an attempt to investigate these contentious issues by profiling a multi-background class typical in the Metro Vancouver area, analyzing the learning strengths and weaknesses of each group and providing some practical, albeit controversial, strategies in test design. The ultimate purpose of this research is not to claim that the strategies are the best, but to show that they are only working strategies which are open to discussion and to further improvement.

2. Student background

Students who take university Mandarin can be roughly divided into two major streams: non-heritage and heritage. Though such a division is seemingly easy and straightforward, it is actually anything but. What is presented below is a detailed profile of the actual student make-up behind those two 'deceptive' labels.

2.1. Non-heritage Students

A large portion of this group is made up of East Asian students like Koreans and Japanese. This group of learners are familiar with the Asian culture and many of them have been exposed to Chinese characters already. Even within this group, disparity persists: Japanese students tend to have a better grasp of Chinese characters which form part of the Japanese writing system. Yet, the Korean students may have an overall advantage in the Chinese language as a whole if they have been to Chinese language schools that mushroomed in Metro Vancouver in recent years. The second group in this stream is the Caucasian learners, a group which each Chinese program intends to woo and to be 'proud of'[1]. Yet this group have no or little prior knowledge of the Chinese language and culture: they are the true beginners who have to learn everything from scratch, linguistically and culturally. The third group is the third generation Chinese who grew up in English-speaking- only households, but who may be familiar with certain aspects of the Chinese culture and a few daily expressions.

2.2. Heritage Students

About 30% of Metro Vancouverites are of Chinese origin and the percentage is much higher in Chinese classes at universities as students of Chinese descent vie to learn their heritage language for various reasons.   While this stream of students provides us with the most FTEs, it is ironically this stream that gives instructors most headaches thanks to their complicated internal make-ups. In this stream, one group consists of those who were born and raised in Canada and in other non-Chinese speaking countries. Even within this group, it can be further divided into those whose families use Mandarin as their home language and those who use Cantonese or other Chinese dialects as their home language. This native born group can also be divided along another line: whether they

---

[1] I am not sure whether our western language colleagues make special efforts to woo non-western students and pride themselves on having a large number of non-western students in their classes – an indeed interesting   cultural/ psychological research topic on its own.

have learned Mandarin before entry to university; whether they learned it at weekend Chinese schools when they were young, usually under parental coercion or coaxing, or whether they learned it at high school for credits. The second major group in the Heritage stream refers to those who were born in Chinese speaking countries and regions, and which can be sub-divided into the Mandarin sub-group (China, Taiwan, Singapore) and the non-Mandarin sub-group   group (Hong Kong, Macau).

3. Learner Characteristics and Testing Philosophy

Thanks to its large student population and copious budget, UBC has the admirable luxury to formally divide their Chinese courses into two streams along the heritage/non-heritage line. The rest of us only have to make do with whatever resources available and place and pool together students of various backgrounds after initial assessments. Fortunately, having multi-background classes is not the end of the world and each group of learners has their own learning advantages and disadvantages. If instructors can identify and make good use of the learning characteristics of each group of learners, they can still address the issues raised at the beginning of this paper. Learner characteristics can be summarized as follows:

- **Non-heritage students:**

  - **Strong in**: Pinyin and grammar for lack of any prior knowledge of any Chinese dialects, i.e. they have to LEARN the new language diligently, not naturally acquire it as their heritage counterparts

  - **Weak in**: Characters!! and   tones to a certain degree

- **Heritage students:**

  - **Strong in**: characters thanks to prior exposure

    Weak in: Pinyin (esp. Cantonese speakers) AND grammar (too arrogant to really study the language seriously but just rely on their linguistic sense from the Chinese dialect they have previously acquired)

Based on these characteristics, I intend to address the three issues raised above by adopting the following philosophy: treating students FAIRLY, but not EQUALLY. This philosophy can be implemented in two ways. One way is to take learner characteristics into account and design the test in such a way that the non-heritage group can fully utilize their 'advantage' characteristics. The other way to implement this philosophy is to take student background and degree of progress into account in marking the tests and in assigning the course grades. This paper just focuses on the first implementation of the philosophy, i.e.   test design, with a multi-background clientele in mind.

4. Special Test Design Strategies

I do use other conventional test formats in my exams such as 'Translate into Chinese Characters'. I will limit my discussion here only to special test formats I tailor designed to appeal to mixed-background Chinese classes which consist of non-heritage and heritage beginning students.

4.1. The PINYIN Strategy

As indicated above, non-heritage students find PINYIN more accessible. I therefore take advantage of this feature and incorporate it to various degrees in test designs:

4.1.1. *Answer the following questions using PINYIN*:

This format is primarily used in the very first Mandarin course the purpose of which is to enable students to communicate in real life situations. Sample questions:

1. Do you go to class on Sunday?

2. Is there a washroom here?

3. Where do you work?

4. How much are the apples?

5. Do you have the day off (=rest) today?

One may argue that PINYIN is not the real Chinese writing and should not be tested too much. My counter argument is that such an emphasis on PINYIN can be defended pedagogically in addition to those non-pedagogical factors raised at the beginning of this paper. First of all, language learning, especially with the communicative approach, should put listening and speaking first and foremost, and testing PINYIN on a written test is one way to ensure that listening and speaking are mastered, at least on paper. My second pedagogical argument is that characters are always a bottleneck for students, including for many of those native born heritage students. At the beginning of their learning, why should we erect a stumbling block on their learning journey with an unreasonable emphasis on characters? This would only stump their interest and motivation. In the first year Japanese courses, students are required to learn to write ONLY about 150 characters for the WHOLE academic year, and some of my non-heritage students switched to Japanese primarily for our demand on the writing of each of the characters learned in addition to tones! Therefore, testing in PINYIN at the beginning stage is sound not only strategically, but also linguistically and pedagogically as well.

4. 1.2. *ANSWER the Pinyin questions using Chinese characters and answer the character questions using Pinyin. Write complete sentences, not short ones*:

This format is mainly used for the second year Mandarin courses where character reading and writing are emphasized in addition to the PIINYIN reading and writing:

1.   ni hui ge i ni de na n/nǚ pe ngyou so ng she nme   li wu ?

2. 你是哪个球队的球迷？你有什么体育爱好？

The first advantage of this format is that both reading and writing of characters and

PINYIN are tested, thus giving the non-heritage students who are poor in character writing a little edge in reading and writing PINYIN. This would also force them to learn to READ the characters at least. Note that the characters required in reply to the first PINYIN question are common ones and are relatively easy to write, an accessible setup for the non-heritage students. The second advantage is that by replying in PINYIN to questions written in characters and vice versa, students would not be able to copy the words listed in the questions: they are really on their own to come up with written answers, be they characters or PINYIN.

4.1.3. *Fill in the blanks with PINYIN, with one PINYIN word for one blank***:**

Here is another way to apply the PINYIN strategy:

1. 公共汽车很高，有两层（***double deck***），你想坐 1-----边吗？那儿景(view)很好。
2. 我 2------（a word meaning 'skill'）做今天的功课，(你)3-----帮助我!
3. 我想 4-----我的同学一起去 5-----球，行吗？

It is true that heritage students are better readers in decoding Chinese characters, but in the <u>second</u> of the first year courses, non-heritage students should not lag in character reading either; otherwise, they should not have moved on to this follow-up class to begin with. Again to tackle the character writing issue, I ask students to fill in the blanks with PINYIN, not characters, and this would put the two streams of students on a relatively equal footing. For the heritage students, even though they have a better linguistic sense and know the right word to put in, they are likely to err with the PINYIN spelling, which will still cost them a deduction. On the other hand, for the non-heritage students, once they have deciphered the sentences and have really studied the texts where the questions come from, they should know the answer. Even if they are usually struggling with character writing, they are only required to provide the easier option as an answer – in PINYIN. Interestingly as expected, both heritage and non-heritage tend to get the same marks on this format of questions.

4.1.4. *Read PINYIN syllables in Oral Test***:**

In addition to using the usual Q/A and text reading formats, I expend 4/10 of the oral test marks on reading individual PINYIN syllables. As expected, non-heritage students perform better than heritage students with this test format.

4.2. The Grammar Strategy

For lack of prior exposure to any Chinese dialects, non-heritage students have to LEARN Chinese and do it through grammar, among other things. In fact, they are presumably the only group of students who would read the grammar part and who would go through the seemingly tedious but effective grammatical drills. The heritage group tends not to as they arrogantly assume that they know the language already. Here are some sample formats:

4.2.1. *Correct mistakes in the following sentences (50%) and BRIEFLY explain in*

***English why they are incorrect (the other 50%). You can add, delete or switch words around, but don't change the original meanings dramatically. There could be more than 1 mistake in one question*:**

1。她高高的，漂亮漂亮的， 所以我想跟她认认识识。

2。我晚上去约会，和我一点儿高兴。

3。我的件衬衫太大了。我要去商店买衬衫，还要买一件裤子。

4。以后旅行，我不想回去学校。(Intended meaning: after traveling, I won't return to school. Keep

去 *in your correction.)*

It is understood that error correction questions such as these are frowned upon for the possibility of negatively impacting and even negatively reinforcing student learning. I still use this type of questions for two purposes: (i) to give students a kind of 'immunization shot' against possible errors; (ii) to balance the advantages of the heritage and non-heritage learners. Most teachers who use this type of questions will stop at the first part, i.e. simply ask students to correct the errors. I go one step further so as to let students rationalize their grammar and make them more analytical as a way to improve their cognitive and learning competence. As discussed before, non-heritage students tend to learn the language via grammar and they tend to do better with the second part than the heritage group. In fact, if the non-heritage students already make the right corrections, but cannot fully articulate their thoughts clearly, I still give them full credits simply because they did study the book to achieve that level of proficiency, and did not rely on any prior knowledge which they do not possess. For the heritage group, I do look at how they explain the errors to ensure that they have studied hard like the non-heritage students and that they do not provide the right answer simply by relying on their prior knowledge. In other words, the 'other 50%' for the explaining part is a kind of effort marks reserved only for those who have really studied, in particular for those heritage students. In addition, my 'differential' marking strategy actually illustrates my second way to implement the philosophy of treating students fairly, but not equally.

4.2.2. Fill in the blanks with PINYIN, with one PINYIN word for one blank:

As presented before, this is a loaded format as students have to do three things right in order to earn the point assigned. In other words, it is intended to kill three birds with one stone. The first purpose is to test students' reading ability of Chinese characters. I can sympathize with non-heritage students for writing poor characters, but do not forgive them for not reading them well enough for sentential comprehension, especially after 1100. The second purpose is to test students' understanding of key grammar points, and the last one is to test their PINYIN. It is the last two points which non-heritage students tend to be good at. Examples (from 1101) are as follows:

1. *我们上山6-----吧。*

2. 这里的每一7-----眼镜都很贵，请让我想8-----。

The repeated use of this format over the years has yielded ideal balanced test results to address the concerns raised at the beginning of this paper: I have never received any complaints from students, heritage or non-heritage, regarding this and all other test formats.

4.2.3. *Reading Comprehension and vocabulary review: Pinyin Crossword Puzzle. Write the PINYIN from Left to Right. You are supposed to first come up with the right word based on the clue provided and then put the word in the blank, e.g. Word #1 is given as an example:*

Clues:

1. 你坐地铁的地方	2. 你存(deposit)钱和取(withdraw)钱的地方
3. 工作 (not as a regular fulltime)	4. 不贵
5 . 你看书和借书的地方	6. 每个月从 11 号到 20 号叫--- ---。
7 . 爸爸妈妈	8。你应该昨天还书，可是你今天还没还书，所以你的书今天--- ---了。
9 . 吃饭的地方/房间	10. 没有事儿，不忙
11 . 我的狗病了，我很着急，也很--- ---.	
12 . 你买东西的地方	

////// 1	d	i	t	i	e	z	h	a	n	/////////
/////////	/////////	////// 2								/////////
///////	///////	////// 3							////////	///////
///////	///////	////// 4							////////	///////
///////5										////////
///////	///////// 6									////////
///////	///////	//////// 7								///////
///////	///////	////////	//////8					////////	///////
///////	///////	//////9								///////
///////	////////10									////////
//////	///////	////////	////////11							///////
/////////	//////12									

This 'fun' test is another way to test students' three linguistic skills as presented in the wording of the question: character reading, vocabulary review and Pinyin writing. In this format, the chances for heritage students to lose marks are almost equal to those for the non- heritage students. Consequently, an even grade distribution is achieved between these

two streams of students.

5. Conclusion

It can be argued that not all these formats are based on sound pedagogy; instead, they are designed at least in part for non-academic reasons. We are not living in an ideal world and our classrooms are much more diverse than envisioned by any education textbooks. Every instructor knows how challenging it is to teach any classes of diverse backgrounds, let alone a language class of this nature. The strategies proposed here are intended to be working strategies.   With those strategies I have been used for over 15 years, I have succeeded at least in part in encouraging and enticing non-heritage students to move on to higher level courses and in preventing grade A inflation in my courses. Students who have been with me for a while know very well that if they really want to get an A in my class, they really have to study the textbook carefully and comprehensively, including Pinyin, grammar and characters. I also told them that studying grammar may be tedious, esp. for heritage students, but it will lead to a better understanding of the grammar of English and other languages for that matter. It will also train them to become competent and discerning readers, a skill which will benefit them not just for language and other courses, but also for their future career and the rest of their life as well. Again not a single student took issues with my aforementioned test strategies either in person or in course evaluations, a fact which I took as a compliment to my test design to deal with the challenge of teaching multi-background classes.

References:

Li, Dazhong 李大忠(1996).《外国人学汉语语法偏误分析》(*Analysis of Errors Made by Chinese as a Second Language Students* (Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press).

Qu, Yanfeng (2009). Strategies for Writing Chinese Textbooks for Canadian Students*, in Pedagogical Research on TCSL from Multi-perspectives: Proceedings of the 7h International Conference on Chinese Pedagogy* (ed. Chang-zhuo Cai) (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press), 554-558

Qu, Yanfeng, (2009). Towards Pedagogical Fun: Language Games for Contemporary Chinese*, in Chinese Language Teaching and Learning: Theories and Practice – Applied Chinese Language Studies II (ed. G. X. Zhang) (London, UK: Cypress Books Co. Ltd), 87-94.

Yang, Jizhou 杨寄洲, Cui Yonghua 崔永华(1997).《对外汉语课堂教学技巧》*Chinese as a Second Language Classroom Pedagogy* (Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press).

Zhou, Jian 周健 (1998).《汉语课堂教学技巧与游戏》*Chinese Teaching Techniques and Game* (Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press).