Chapter 76
Pedagogical Challenges in Cross-Cultural Chinese Language Teaching:
Perceptions and Experiences of Chinese Immersion Teachers in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, a qualitative approach was used to enlist Chinese immersion practitioners in the identification and elaboration of issues and challenges in Chinese immersion language teaching. Through extensive individual interviews and reflection writings, six pre--1 Chinese immersion teachers recruited from China in five school settings served as informants. Data analyses revealed that the Chinese immersion teachers encountered significant challenges in six major areas of their immersion teaching: curriculum development, use of the target language, classroom management, subject area teaching, teaching style, and working with American partners and parents. These varied challenges suggest that professional development for Chinese immersion teachers needs to include training in cross-cultural classroom management skills, curriculum development, content-based Chinese language teaching, and host country school culture education.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the traditional foreign language instruction that teaches the target language as the subject, immersion programs use the target language to deliver the content knowledge of different subject areas and as a means of authentic communication. This communicative language instruction allows students to acquire a foreign language in a similar manner to the way that they have learned their first (CARLA,

2007). Much research (e.g., Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010; Forrest, 2007; Genesee & Jared, 2008) has revealed that, because immersion students learn the curricular content through immersion languages, they are able to acquire both the content and the language without having to spend additional time learning the target language at the expense of other subject areas. This approach is much more effective and efficient than traditional foreign language instruction that focuses merely on the language itself (Rifkin, 2007). The effectiveness in promoting students' language proficiency can be summarized as follows (Bostwick, 2001; Swain, 1988; Swain & Lapkin, 1982). First, immersion instruction provides a meaningful curricular context where teachers deliver the content knowledge by connecting new information with known information and students communicate about what they know and what they want to know, as well as about their feelings and attitudes. This creates an environment that is conducive to both successful language acquisition and content learning. Second, this important social context allows meaningful peer-peer communication and authentic teacher-student interaction in the immersion language. Third, the integration of language and content provides a wide variety of contexts for students to use the foreign language in a meaningful way.

Besides the pedagogical and linguistic advantages of immersion instruction over traditional foreign language instruction, immersion education also helps accelerate students' academic performance and cognitive development. Numerous studies on Spanish and French immersion students (e.g., Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Forrest, 2007; Genesee & Jared, 2008) have revealed that, compared with students in traditional non-immersion programs, immersion students typically achieved higher levels of L1 and L2 language proficiency. In addition, they tended to have higher achievement scores, grade point averages and educational expectations than their monolingual peers (Lindholm-Leary & Howard, 2008). Furthermore, immersion environments promote the development of students' social and cognitive abilities that seem unrelated to their L1 and L2 language development. For example, immersion students have outperformed monolinguals in the areas of mental flexibility, divergent thinking, inhibitory control, and problem-solving (Bamford & Mizokawa, 1990; Bialystok, 2001; Lazaruk, 2007).

The effectiveness of immersion education, reflected in a body of published research (Bournot-Trites & Reeder, 2005; Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Marian, Shook, & Schroeder, 2013; Swain & Lapkin, 1998), has led to a rapid growth of foreign language immersion programs in the U.S. Self-reported data collected by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL, 2011) shows a fairly steady increase in foreign language immersion programs in U.S. schools over the last 35 years. In the 1970s, less than 10 foreign language immersion programs existed. By 2006, there were almost 300 such programs. Among them, Romance languages dominated the immersion programs in the U.S. Currently the most commonly taught languages are Spanish, which is at 45% of foreign language immersion programs, and French, which constitutes 22% (CAL, 2011).

With the recent effects of globalization, parental demands for high quality foreign language education for communicative purposes has become stronger and stronger, and there has been increasing support for establishing foreign language immersion programs at the K-12 school level. In 2006, the political legislation by the President's National Security Language Initiative (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) to develop the foreign language skills of American students, especially in "critical-need" foreign languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Hindi, further fueled the rapid rise of foreign language immersion programs in the U.S.

This trend of increasing "critical-need" language programs has also led to a surge of Mandarin Chinese immersion programs in the U.S. over the past decade (Asia Society, 2012). A report of Mandarin Immersion Parents Council (http://miparentscouncil.org/full-mandarin-immersion-school-list/) reveals

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