

Mandarin: Conquering the Language Classrooms around the World

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Abstract

Every sixth person on earth speaks Chinese language and today it is not just limited to country's 5,000-year old civilization and oriental philosophical thought. Due to the growing economic and political impact of China, this exploratory study takes a bird eye view of how Chinese language is crossing the geographic barriers and reaching the language classrooms around the world. Practically it has beaten the French, German, and even Japanese languages and has limitless future opportunities. It is estimated that more than a billion people will learn Chinese in the near future. People will prefer to invest in a particular language, if it gives greatest benefits in terms of facilitation as well as the sheer number of people, institutions, and businesses they will be able to communicate with. Chinese language fulfils all of these motivational requirements. With the aspirations to train 100 million new Chinese speakers, by the end of first decade of 21st century, along with other measures, Chinese government has established tens of institutions around the world. English is incontestably the global lingua franca of the current era of globalization, but it is not without competitors.

Key Words: Mandarin; Chinese Language; World Language Classrooms; *Lingua Franca*; Ideographic Language; Confucius Institute

1. Language

The providence of any language express the beauty of our thought and provides a means by which we engage in those most human of activities: expression, and communication (Shanahan 1997). Being infinitely flexible and universally present, it allows us to have culture and complex societies and lets us encode massive amounts of information and generate complex ideas that would otherwise be impossible. Language lives and develops in the lives and circumstances of its users and without it, culture and civilization would be impossible (Dhir 2005). It is the tool that everyone uses in learning and teaching (Larsen-Freeman and Freeman 2008). Modern sources generally propose that modern thought and language emerged at the latest about 40-50 thousand years ago (Klein 2000). Language emerges from the human ability of producing, perceiving and learning language, the dynamics of language in the social set-up, and the biological evolution of our ability to use language (Christiansen and Kirby 2003; Kirby, Dowman et al. 2007). Language evolution, in a nutshell, is the product of both biological and cultural evolution (Vogt and de Boer), which resulted in a variety of languages, sharing many universal structural properties because of men's innate faculty for acquiring and processing language tactics (Hawkins 1994; Croft 2002).

Language is the other name of knowledge, which brings rewards much like the same to those generated by other types of knowledge, such as education does (Hoccar 1975; Breton 1978).

Vaillancourt (1980) regards the mother tongue of an individual as an ethnic attribute and a type of knowledge. It is widely believed that the knowledge acquired by an individual is constrained by the language in which the acquisition takes place, and therefore, different languages may have dissimilar value to individuals (Dhir and Savage 2002; Dhir 2005). In all social communities, messages are used to exchange ideas, information, or knowledge between parties engaged in social discourse, like money is used to exchange economic assets. And as in different economic communities, different currency may be used to transact money. Similarly, in different social communities, different language may be deployed to communicate or transact ideas.

Everyone is born with the ability to learn a language and good language learning is said to depend on at least three variables: aptitude, motivation and opportunity (Rubin 1975). If students of language perceive their performance unsatisfactory, then their motivation will be diminished (Oxford and Shearin 1994). People have been found prioritizing to invest in a language that would give them the myriads of benefits – not only what the language facilitates but also in the shape of sheer number of people they communicate, institutions they work in, and businesses they run will be able to communicate with (Dor 2004). And every speaker of certain language who decides to learn and go with a new language, automatically increases both the language's prevalence and its centrality (Dor 2004).

2. Language; culture; literature

The Chinese culture belongs not only to the Chinese but also to the whole world.

Hu Jintao

Language acts like a mirror of any culture; in every culture it is an inherent component and also an epithet of it; through it people can have sense to see their culture (Jiang 2000). So without language, culture ceases to exist (Claes 1995; Jiang 2000; Welch and Welch 2008). It comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds, as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. Language development varies across the cultures; the process of becoming an active and expert member of society is attained through inter-communication of language in certain social situations (Ding and Saunders 2006). To become culturally competent, cultural values are important for second language learners to grasp its primary understanding of a relevant culture which in turn help them to behave in tune with its essence (Zhu 2008). Language and culture are inseparably connected, and cannot be neatly separated by distinctions like “structure” versus “practice” (Hill and Mannheim 1992; Ding and Saunders 2006). Literature represents the pinnacles of any language and civilization as a whole (Shanahan 1997). Much literature carries with it strong undercurrents of the time and place in which it is written (Shanahan 1997).

3. Factors affecting the growth of a language

3.1 Globalization

The process of globalization indisputably has shown far-reaching linguistic consequences for the general social function of language and the relationships among different languages, speakers, various nation-states, and even the global market in the world (Dor 2004). Language has become increasingly vital for the acquisition of competitive lead, in the face of increased globalization of trade and business, that has consequently affected the ability of multi-national organizations to compete in the global market (Dhir 2005). Organizations are like systems that create and manage both information and knowledge (Kolodny, Liu et al. 1996).

To serve its stakeholders in a knowledge economy, organizations must acquire a general understanding of local and global environments, communication skills, interpersonal and team skills, and stakeholder orientation. Communication, and therefore language, is the essential skill that gives man the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge (Dhir 2005). Business and economy are becoming increasingly global in nature, and corporations aiming to bring people at same platform having different cultural orientations, and certainly all people do not speak the same language to communicate (Dhir and Goke-Pariola 2002).

The challenge of providing common set of activities performed by individuals who speak different languages can be daunting task, both within and beyond the organizational set-up. Organization having personnel with diversified cultures and distinct languages offers opportunities to a global organization not available or lacking to its competitors in the market (Dhir and Goke-Pariola 2002). Organizations operate in economic systems, which are rooted in the culture of the society, and language is the fundamental medium through which culture, tradition, and custom are transmitted to the stakeholders, both within and outside the organization (Dhir 2005).

Success of cross-border mergers of companies, acquisitions and collaborative projects of companies relies partly on good communications between individual participants, which partly relies on the parties being familiar with each other's language (Hancock 1999; Dor 2004). Global businesses are gradually abandoning not only the attempt to "uncover the universal predictive laws of the market" but also the utopia of an "international lingua franca" and are looking at ways to penetrate local markets in their own languages. Native linguistic identity plays a crucial role in consumers' decision-making processes. The key to capturing that increasingly global consumer base is going to be native language-based Web sites.

3.2 Internet

Internet has given new impetus to the process of globalization and it is essentially becoming a multilingual cyberspace (Dor 2004). The Net is going to be a predominantly non-English-language medium. According to estimates provided by Global Reach, an online marketing firm, in 2003 the English-based Internet community comprised around 230 million users, whereas the non-English-speaking community comprised 403 million users. Estimates for 2004 are 280 million English users and no less than 657 million non-English users. Moreover, the sheer number of languages used on the Web is growing rapidly: current statistics identify twenty-seven languages that are heavily represented on the internet, accompanied by quite a few additional languages that are trying to join the club (Dor 2004). Innovative Internet technologies are also assisting learning foreign languages, by providing more options for the language learners and increasing motivation to pursue career and business worldwide. Online courses can be created and accessed through a very easy way that never happened before in such an easy way (Chen and Liu 2008).

3.3 Economic and political power

China is on her way to become a tremendously prospective market or even an emerging superpower in the world. In fact, it now accounts for one-third of global economic growth, twice as much as America (Yang 2008). In recent years commentators all around the world have spoken of 'the emergence of China' (Bianco 2007), with the dramatic commercial expansion, especially in industrial production and increasingly in trade. Attracting vast quantities of foreign capital into its industrial and tertiary markets has helped stimulate China's impressive economic performance which has grown at double digit rates unabated since the economic liberalization of the late 1970s. China appears likely to assume the big power role in its UN Security Council status. With the re-emergence of China, the language – Chinese – may possibly become one of the most dominant languages for second language learning because of Chinese growing economy (Bianco 2007). Chinese is spoken by an estimated one out of every six people on earth (Ramzy 2006) and today, it is more than just the language associated with the country's 5,000-year civilization and oriental philosophical thought; it is also a fast-developing commercial lingua franca in the Pacific basin. Its practical value has surpassed that of French, German, and even Japanese in much of the world and its future opportunities seem limitless (Ding and Saunders 2006).

4. Character of Chinese Language

4.1 Chinese: a difficult language

Due to the phonological structure and orthographic features, Mandarin is considered as one of the most difficult languages of the world (Ho and Bryant 1997). Moreover, Chinese cannot be uttered by merely of its Chinese characters (which may be up to 60, 000) unless with the help of Pin-Yin (an alphabetic system used in mainland China) or Zhu-Yin-Fu-Hao (an alphabetic phonetic system used in Taiwan) (Grainger 2005). Pinyin is the Romanisation of the Chinese language, used solely for the purpose of helping learners to pronounce the characters, including 21 consonants and 36 vowels or semi-vowels, which combine to form the syllables in Chinese language. There are slightly more than 400 distinct syllables in Chinese. Taking four tones (high level, mid rising, low dipping, and high falling) into account, there are about 1300 tonal syllables in spoken Chinese and that number represents almost all of the characters (morphemes) (Taylor and Taylor 1998; Hu 2010).

A syllable pronounced in different tones would represent different Chinese characters and result in different meaning in the Chinese language (e.g., /maː /, /má/, /maˇ/, /mà/) (Lee and Kalyuga 2010). Because of these characteristics of Chinese, reading and writing can be mastered only by rote memory. Second language learners/Foreign learners may find it difficult when comes to read and write Chinese characters until and unless it is memorized (Grainger 2005), for instance, to read newspaper, 3,000 characters must be memorized to read it easily.

4.2 Chinese: an ideographic language

Written Chinese is pictorial or ideographic, and the basic unit of the written language is a symbol or a character. Due to ideographic nature of the written language, Chinese characters lack the accuracy of pronunciation and information conveyed by characters (Hayes 1988; Lee and Kalyuga 2010). Each character contains three linguistic components: sound, shape, and meaning. To learn a character is to master these three components. A Chinese word may be made up of one or multiple characters to render what in English would be a single word. Characters can be classified into two categories according to their physical structure: integral characters and compound characters. An integral character contains only one radical. A compound character, on the other hand, consists of two or more radicals. Radicals are the basic orthographic units in characters. They can be further classified into two categories: phonetic radicals and semantic radicals. Theoretically, a phonetic radical represents the sound of a character and a semantic radical provides clues to the meaning of the character. Mastering the writing skills is even more difficult. Strokes act as primary building blocks for radicals in characters (Shen 2005). According to Huang and Liao (1981) there are a total of 28 distinguishable types of strokes, and the number of strokes in a particular character may vary from 1 to 30 in Chinese language.

There is no set pattern as to how many strokes a character could possess (Shen 2005). Due to large number of homophones in Chinese, some characters unavoidably share the same/similar pronunciation (Pin Yin) but it is not necessary that their meanings are associated or interlinked (Hu 2010). One of the difficulties in understanding spoken Chinese – detecting semantic borders – can also apply to comprehending written texts, when there is no gap between words, and proper nouns are not marked by capitalisation or any other feature (Hu 2010). Grammar provides an economical and efficient way of expressing meaning and grammatical categories offer the speakers with conscious or unconscious decisions, choices and ways of expressing meaning, which are actualized in discourse (Sherzer 1987). Chinese grammar is somewhat easy as it is free from such morphological signs as tense and case etc. Grammar teaching in Chinese currently seems to be largely form-based, using grammatical meta-language to explain functions and to parse sentences (Loke 2002; Hu 2010). The graphic nature of Chinese characters is complex, and the morphemic structure of the language is not common. Taken all these and other factors into account one could have idea that why learning and how to write a Chinese character is a challenge for most non-native speakers and second language learner (Hao, Hong et al. 2010).

5. Mandarin conquers the world classrooms

Owing to political and economic factors, Mandarin Chinese is becoming the second *lingua franca* in the world. It is estimated that more than a billion people will learn Chinese in the near future (Hao, Hong et al. 2010). From Jakarta to Vancouver and from New Delhi to Chicago, surging interest in studying the Chinese language is just one gauge of the greater magnetic pull that China exerts after two decades of galloping economic growth (Ding and Saunders 2006). The number of non-Chinese people studying Chinese now stands at 30 million. More than 2,300 universities in roughly 100 countries are offering Chinese courses as part of their curricula. China is now South Korea's biggest trading partner and its people are signing up for Chinese lessons with zeal. South Koreans are the largest group of foreigners studying in China (Ramzy 2006). And the number of high school and university students in South Korea, who study the Chinese language, is increasing every year. The number of Japanese secondary schools- offering Mandarin- more than tripled within the lapse of 1993 to 2005 (Ramzy 2006).

In the United States, the number of students studying Chinese language is growing unprecedented as compared with other foreign languages. Just in the universities of United States, nearly 800 have started offering Chinese language courses (Ding and Saunders 2006). In Singapore, government vigorously promotes Mandarin Chinese to simultaneously reduce inter-ethnic communication barriers and promote greater ties across Southeast Asia (Ding and Saunders 2006). In 2004, China became Cambodia's biggest foreign investor, thus created space for Chinese language in job market, so now some Cambodians think Mandarin is as useful as English (Ramzy 2006). With the growing importance of China both politically and economically in the world today, the Chinese language is gradually becoming more of a practical and attractive option for students in the UK. From 2000-2004, the number of students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland doing Advanced Level exams in Chinese climbed by 57% (Ramzy 2006). Data from the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency suggest that the number of Chinese learners in higher education institutions in the UK increased by 125% between 1996 and 2007 (Hu 2010).

6. Efforts of Chinese government in promoting Chinese language

Languages are the assets of nations which distinct one from the other, and have always been the companion of empire (Bianco 2007). In every period of globalization, the principal hegemonic power has promoted its own language as a tool for unity across time and space (Ding and Saunders 2006). The Chinese government itself has also taken the task to promote Mandarin, taking it as a way to develop soft image abroad and to garner national strength across the board (Ramzy 2006). Chinese government has conceptualized many programs and has materialized some of them to popularize the Chinese language around the world in a systematic way and on massive scale (Ding and Saunders 2006). The most institutionalized and strategic form of influence is the establishment of state policies and agencies entrusted with the task of promoting national languages and cultures abroad. In 1987 China established the National Office of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOTCFL) with a range of activity including, cultural exchanges and tours, support networks for foreign teachers of Chinese, and a wide array of language teaching supports (Bianco 2007). The NOTCFL has begun establishing China's own global network of overseas Chinese learning centres; Confucius Institutes, which provide the resources of Chinese language teaching and research to host countries (Ding and Saunders 2006).

As of late 2005, the NOTCFL had established 32 Confucius Institutes in some 23 countries around the world and by 2010 it had a target to establish 100 Confucius Institutes worldwide (Ding and Saunders 2006; Bianco 2007). These institutes have a goal to train 100 million new Chinese speakers over the next five years. China has also deployed more than 2,000 Peace Corps-like volunteers to teach Mandarin overseas, mostly in Asian nations such as Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea. In order to make Chinese a "strong language" and promote the teaching and research of Chinese globally, the first World Chinese Language Conference, with a theme of "The Development of Chinese in a Multicultural World," was held in Beijing in 2005 (Ding and Saunders 2006). The Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), known as the "Chinese TOEFL," has seen an increase in examinees of about 40-50 percent every year. Since the test was put in practice in 1990, hundreds of test sites have been established in more than 40 countries, and hundreds of thousands of people have taken part in the test (Ding and Saunders 2006). China has achieved impressive gains in terms of cultural power resources which include an improved national image, strong international cultural exchanges, greater inbound and outbound tourism, worldwide distribution of cultural products, etc. While English is incontestably the global *lingua franca* of the current era of globalization, it is not without competitors (Ding and Saunders 2006).

7. Outlook

Learning of a language is motivated by its value, not just in terms of what the language facilitates but also in terms of the sheer number of people, institutions, and businesses they will be able to communicate with. Along with the elaboration of overall importance of language, this article highlights the motivational aspects, one would consider to learn Chinese language. With the increasing political and economic power, China is on her way to become a tremendously prospective market or even an emerging superpower in the world. China appears likely to assume the big power role in its UN Security Council status. With increased globalization of trade and business, language has become increasingly critical for the acquisition of competitive advantage, and it affects the ability of multinational organizations to function in the global market. Organizations operate in economic systems, which are rooted in the culture of the society, and language is the fundamental medium through which culture, tradition, and custom are transmitted to the stakeholders, both within and outside the organization. Due to tremendous economic growth, China is becoming the centre of business activity.

This would certainly make organizations working in China to bring together people from local cultural orientations, with good communication in Chinese language. Success of cross-border mergers, acquisitions and collaborative projects relies partly on good communications between individual participants. To penetrate local Chinese market, all kind of business organizations will have to abandon the utopia of an "international *lingua franca*" and will have to look at ways to penetrate the local markets in their own language. Native linguistic identity plays a crucial role in consumers' decision-making. Internet is also playing a crucial role, within China as well as abroad, to spread Chinese language, by providing more options for the learners and increasing motivation. Languages have always been the companion of empire, and in every period of globalization, the principal hegemonic power has promoted its own language as a tool for unity across time and space. In order to make Chinese a strong language, and to train more than 100 million new Chinese speakers, by the end of first decade of 21st century, along with other measures, Chinese government has established tens of institutions around the world.

Although Chinese is a difficult language due to ideographic nature of its characters, tremendous efforts of Chinese government and all these practical and attractive options will certainly make the Chinese language the second *lingua franca* of the world.

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