

Language Teaching Experience of Chinese Language Assistants

In June 2006, Scottish CILT's Information Officer Sheila McLachlan interviewed four Chinese Language Assistants (two male and two female, all native Mandarin speakers), who are all training to be English teachers in China. Two were working at St George's School for Girls in Edinburgh (supported by a full-time permanent teacher of Mandarin), one at Dunbar Grammar School and the fourth at Knox Academy in Haddington, East Lothian. The article summarises the key issues arising from these interviews.

Background details of assistants

Name	Origin	Started learning English	School/Teaching groups
Feitao Wang (male)	Chongqing (biggest city in SW China)	13	St George's: Ages 5-18
Yun Liu (female)	Kunming (capital city of SW China)	13	St George's: Ages 5-18
Xin Wu (male)	Xiamen (Southern China)	11	Knox Academy: P5, S6
Lingwei Yang (female)	Special economic zone in SE China	13	Dunbar Grammar: Predominantly S3-S6

Language learning experience in China

English learning is compulsory in all Chinese schools, and in many cases no other foreign language is taught. Whilst the four assistants interviewed all started their English lessons in their early teens it appears that now children in China can learn English earlier, i.e. from age six or seven. Language teaching appears to have been characterised by a heavy emphasis on examinations and grammar, a lack of oral practice due to the large class sizes and a lack of qualified teachers at that time:

Lots of grammar and vocabulary. You had to listen to the teacher a lot. (Yun)

At Secondary school – reading, grammar and vocabulary. When I majored at university the focus was on listening and speaking with some writing. (Xin)

There were sometimes 50-60 pupils in a class. There was not much opportunity for oral practice because of this. The main focus was on written English language-vocabulary, grammar, writing articles, reading something. (Linwei)

In 1987 the conditions were very poor. We only had a tape recorder and teachers were not qualified. There were comparatively few qualified English teachers at that time. [...] there is a quiz every week and a test fortnightly and students get marked. Twice a year there is a final test at half term. (Feitao)

According to Xin, however, language teaching in China has become "more interactive now". Although the assistants all bemoaned the fact that there was not enough speaking, too much emphasis on grammar, and the frequent (weekly) examinations, they all had instances of real enjoyment, particularly when

The lessons gave me the real language, which you could use in your daily life. (Linwei)

Feitao, in particular, appears to have enjoyed English *despite* the teaching methodology:

I liked reading English novels, English newspapers and magazines and listening to English songs. I hated grammar and boring exercises and we had a lot of it [...] But I just liked English. I'm really mad about it. (Feitao)

Yun would have liked to have more teaching in the target language, and she regrets not being able to implement this methodology in Scotland:

We were taught English through the medium of Mandarin-it is the same here. The pupils are taught Mandarin through the medium of English. I do not like this. (Yun)

Preparatory Training and Ongoing Support

All four assistants had been recruited via the British Council. They had preparatory training in the form of meetings with former language assistants and an induction course in London. These were organised by the British Council and also included information about work-related aspects, e.g. the Scottish and English teaching systems, and cultural differences, which all found very helpful. Indeed, one of the assistants felt that

People in China know much more about the UK than the other way round. (Xin)

The assistants said they were keeping in touch with teachers in China, but they also met regularly on a social level but would use the opportunity to share teaching ideas:

Lots of exchanges of ideas and sharing of resources via the internet. We also talk to teachers in China and ask for advice. (Feitao)

Sometimes we have supper together so we can talk about what we want to teach, how we teach. I communicate with my colleagues in China who ask about life in Scotland. (Linwei)

On the other hand, there does not appear to have been the opportunity for observing other language teachers at work:

I have no idea about other language teaching and learning. I have only observed a couple of other classes. (Feitao)

Difficulties for Scottish pupils learning Chinese

The assistants said they were adopting different teaching methodologies depending on the age group of the pupils. For example, five to seven-year olds do not do written tasks but speak and listen more. Those in the examination classes were getting more written assignments.

They agreed that Scottish pupils found the writing of Chinese characters difficult, but also intriguing. Two of the assistants explained how they tried to approach the teaching of Chinese characters:

To remember the structure of the characters as the characters to them are like pictures so it is very very hard. We help them to know the structures. There are regulations. Once you know how the characters are formed it is easier for you to remember the structures. (Feitao)

The children find the characters very interesting and I find some easy way to get them to know how a Chinese character is formed and give them the general idea so they would like to copy some if they can remember that and it is quite amazing for me. (Linwei)

Tones were another difficulty:

When you speak English you can connect the sound together but in Chinese you need to divide them and sometimes you just cannot produce that sound.

According to Yun and Xin, however, this did not matter so much as native speakers would be able to guess the meaning from the context.

There were some concerns that Scottish pupils frequently lacked the confidence to tackle challenging tasks, preferring instead to settle for the 'easy option':

The pupils like it easier but sometimes if they are very confident they want something more challenging. They are discouraged when they find it very difficult. We need to encourage them to feel confident. (Feitao)

At the beginning I should give them the easy tasks to let them be confident but later on it would be boring to only give them the easy tasks so you give them the more challenging so they can build up their confidence. (Linwei)

There was a feeling that pupils should be given more chances to review what they had learned so that they would not so easily forget it.

Language learning and teaching: China vs. Scotland

Two of the assistants referred to the huge disparity in class sizes:

Classes here are much smaller. In China there are normally 60 students in one classroom. Here there might be 20-30 or 35 (Feitao)

The class sizes are too big in China for learning a language (Linwei)

Linwei felt that reducing class sizes would allow teachers to pay greater attention to individual learners. She also remarked on the choice available to students here:

They can choose German or French. We just have English at the moment, at least in my school. (Linwei)

There were more comments about the teaching methodology itself. Feitao felt that teachers are "more critical in China – here teachers praise more". In particular, there is greater emphasis on interaction with students, which requires cooperation.

In China you listen more, take in knowledge more instead of sharing with other students or their teachers. I like both methods. (Feitao)

However, the Chinese methods were not regarded as universally bad:

I like [the pupils] to listen but for some tasks I like them to share and interact with each other. Both [teaching methodologies] have good points. You need to combine. (Feitao)

Yun felt that whilst smaller classes meant pupils had more chances to speak, and made class control easier, not all pupils were making satisfactory progress in their language learning:

They have no homework and do not make notes. They learn fast but they forget fast also. Every class is like a new class. (Yun)

Although Xin was in favour of more target-language instruction he believed that initially pupils had to be given a lot of information about China, and that this was best done in English. Whilst he had not liked the emphasis on grammar he was surprised to find that pupils here did not appear to know much about the grammar of their own native language. At the same time he strived to give his pupils many opportunities for speaking. He also appears to have bowed to pupils' resistance to writing:

At the beginning my pupils did not have much interest in writing-they called it drawing. They liked to speak. I have transferred to just speaking. (Xin)

However, he preferred the Scottish teaching context to that in China:

In general the pupils here are more outgoing. If they learn something they dare to use it in public – they dare to speak – they are not as shy as Chinese students. (Xin)

At the same time, he did not want Chinese student to be judged too harshly:

Chinese students learn and know and understand a lot of English but are too shy to use it in public. They should not be judged by their spoken performance. They are too shy to use it and often understand more than you realise. (Xin)

Linwei remarked on the differences of teaching English in China and teaching Mandarin in Scotland

When I teach English, as it is also a foreign language for me, I can relate to the problems the students may have. But when I teach Mandarin sometimes I don't quite get the point of the students' problems. [...] When I teach English we do some dictation, recite the words, do some reading as well as it's very serious. But here I use pictures or anything else to try to convey a direct image of what China is like and why it is interesting to learn the language (Linwei)

In a way, Linwei agreed she was 'selling' the country as well as the language.

On balance, then, would the assistants prefer to teach here or in China? Let's give the last word to Xin:

I prefer it here. I do not think the pressure is as bad as in China in terms of constant assessment and exams. The teachers here moan about the pressure but I do not think it is so great. [...] (Xin)