

# **From Boring to Bravo: Teachers' Intervention in Chinese Heritage Language Classroom of Young Learners**

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## **Abstract**

Heritage language acquisition/learning has been gaining increasingly attention worldwide. Howard, Olague & Rogers (2003) propose that heritage language program is one of the dual language programs. However, heritage language acquisition is neither first language acquisition nor second language acquisition. Heritage language learning includes learning indigenous language, native culture, and establishment of social/cultural identity. Heritage language learning is not only the responsibility of immigrant parents, but also it is language teachers' undertaking to make great efforts to promote the acquisition/learning of heritage language among young children. In this paper, I address some typical and salient problems in Chinese as Heritage Language classroom of young learners. More importantly, I provide some suggestions that could shed light on teaching practice for this particular group of language learners.

Keywords: Chinese as Heritage Language (CHL), Teacher Practice, Young Learners

## **1. Introduction**

Heritage language is an immigrant, indigenous, ancestral language that a speaker has a personal relevance and desire to (re)connect with (Wiley, 2005). It also can be defined as a language that is acquired by individuals raised in homes where a dominant language, such as English in the United States, is not spoken or not exclusively spoken (Valdes, 2000).

U.S is looked upon as an immigration country. People from all over the world settle down in this nation and meanwhile bring their indigenous language and culture to this nation. A majority of immigrant parents do value their native languages and culture. Therefore, they are inclined to send their young children to the heritage language class to transmit their beloved language/culture to their children.

Heritage language teaching and learning is different from the second language or foreign language teaching/learning. Teachers not only aim to impart the language knowledge to that particular group of students, but also to enliven students to make native language/culture transmitted and maintained among the young learners. The role of teachers in that particular language classroom is the missionary to pass on the inherent language, culture and self-identity to children.

Nonetheless, as for young children, they are not cognitively mature enough to understand why they are pushed to learn that seemingly distant language in formal classroom settings. In this article, the feasible tryouts the writer implemented in his specific Chinese heritage classroom are shared with the teachers in the field of foreign or dual language program of young learners.

## **2. Problems Identification**

Based on my own teaching experience in an after-school Chinese heritage class and on-site observation of several Chinese heritage language classes in Great Philadelphia area, it is found that students easily feel bored confronting the mechanic language learning process (predominant teachers' instruction, repeated drills, etc.) in the language classroom. Kids range from 6 years old to 8 years old. I personally communicated with some students during the break time and after the class. It turned out that almost all the children told me they felt Chinese class was boring and they did not like the Chinese class.

First of all, overall language class seems not fascinating to young learners. Lots of information input and memorizing makes them feel stressed and easily bored. Young learners cannot be concentrated in the long session of the class. From time to time, students say, "I am bored." "Can we play the game?" When teacher asked them to read, write or memorize something, they uttered, "Oh. That's not fun." Young children are easily getting bored when they are immersed in formal classroom learning.

Secondly, the confusion of self-identity appears to be salient in the classroom, which is the important issue to be considered in the heritage language classroom. One of children in my class keeps saying "it is boring; it is boring! Why do I need to learn Chinese?" "I am American!" His father mentioned, "If you forced him to speak Chinese, he will be more reluctant to talk in Chinese." In addition, some young learners mention that they are good at Chinese and they speak Chinese to their parents at home. It is the language between their parents and them, thus it unnecessary for them to get involved in the classroom learning.

## **3. Suggestions for Early Bilingual Education**

Since I found some problems that young learners do not tend to be passionate when they are immersed in the early bilingual education, I have been doing my utmost to find out the solutions; feasible teaching methods or contents to attract young learners' attention in dual language program. Here are some attempts I made in my Chinese heritage language classroom.

### **3.1. Exploration of Cultural Myth**

Foreign/second/heritage language classroom is not merely the place where instructors impart the pure language knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) to the students, but also it is where teachers act as cultural ambassadors to furnish students with culture-related issues/activities. What kind of culture-oriented activities could sparkle young learners' interest in native language learning? Based upon my own teaching and observation, young learners are fascinated with some activities such as fairy stories/folklores' telling and handworks. So, why don't we incorporate these issues under the specific cultural background to make learning more appealing?

In my Chinese heritage language class, I constantly tell the students about Chinese folklores, such as monkey king, zodiac animal story. Students are inclined to be fascinated by the stories. For example, I told the story of Chinese zodiac animals to the kids. That class objective is to let students get familiar with twelve animals of Chinese zodiac signs so that they could show more interest in Chinese language and culture learning.

Before the story-telling, I asked them to identify their own zodiac signs. It turned out every child had already known their signs, by saying, “sheep,” “monkey,” “horse.” I furthered the question by asking them how to say it in Chinese. They mumbled, “羊(sheep), 猴子 (monkey), 马 (horse).” After sharing about their own zodiac signs, I passed out the handouts with pictures and texts (excerpts shown in the following pictures).

那時，貓和老鼠像親兄弟一樣，時常在一起吃飯、睡覺。



老鼠希望能成為十二生肖的第一名，但是卻不會游泳，貓告訴老鼠：「水牛大哥很熱心，牠一定會幫我們。」

當水牛快要抵達終點的時候，老鼠從牛背上跳上岸，老鼠得了第一名，水牛則是第二名。不久，原本呼聲最高的老虎全身濕淋淋地游了過來，得到第三名。



pictures and texts adapted from <http://163.23.82.197/lifetype>

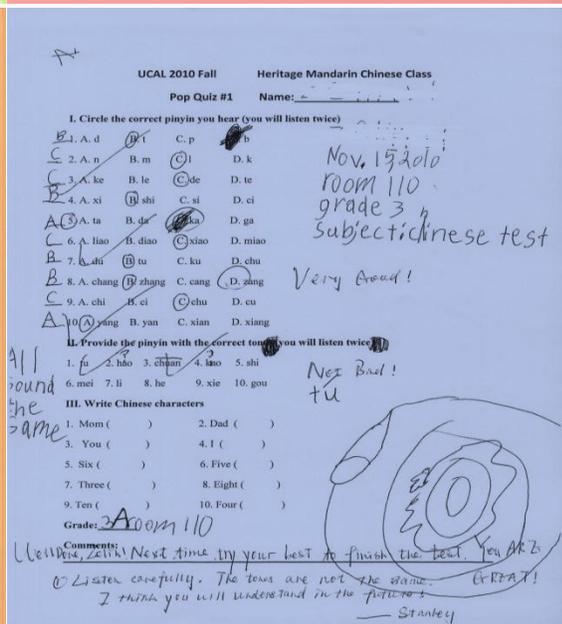
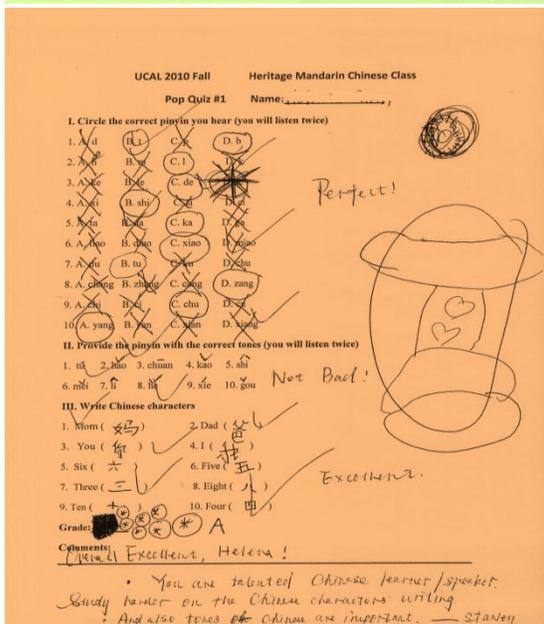
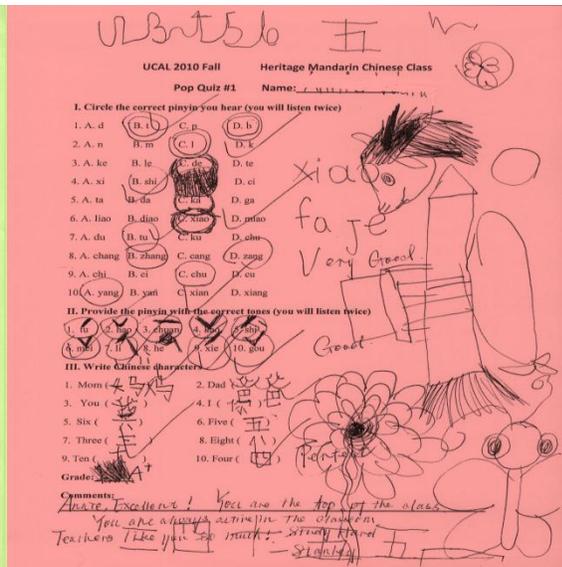
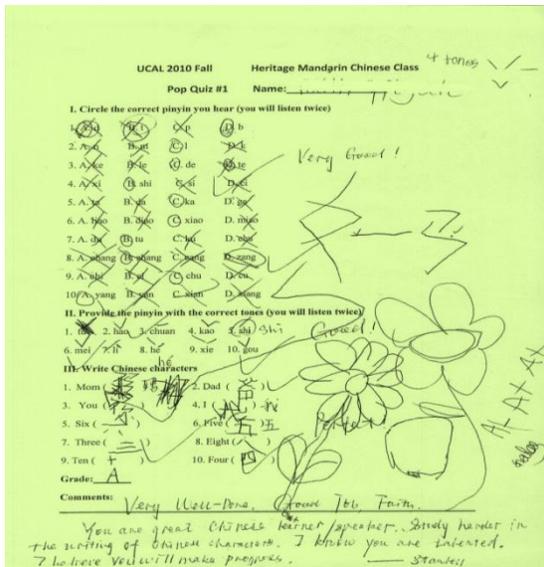
Then, I posed several questions in Chinese to invoke their thinking when they listened to the story, like 为什么猫会成为老鼠的敌人(Why cat became the enemy of the rat)? 为什么老鼠在十二生肖中排在第一(Why rat ranked the first in the zodiac signs?) etc. The curiosity about the plot made them listen to the story attentively. When they heard that “老鼠把猫推下河而得到第一名 (Rat won the first place by pushing cat to the river),” they responded simultaneously, “老鼠真坏 (Rat is too bad).” After the story-telling, children answered my initially-posed questions actively. Furthermore, they asked several follow-up questions concerning the story. And I encouraged them to say in Chinese. One of them asked, “马跑得很快，为什么他是 number six (Horse runs fast. Why did he rank the sixth) since the kid’s sign is horse. The other child asked, “那个羊是男(公)的还是女(母)的? (The sheep is male or female?)”

This traditional Chinese story-telling related the children to the culture of their native language, which triggers their interest and curiosity in specific language learning context. In addition, hand making activities that are related to culture is also suggested, for instance origami (paper folding) and braiding Chinese knot, make young children get familiar with Chinese culture. It is important to make language learning incorporated with cultural knowledge input. Hence, teachers could possibly contemplate the implementation of culture-related activities in the heritage language classroom.

### 3.2. Adding Color to Teaching/Learning Palette

How can teachers make young learner well-behaved in the classroom setting? How can teachers make them be seated without feeling bored in 45-minute or 1-hour class meeting? How can teachers make young kids learn language knowledge, meanwhile they can have fun? It is crucial to find out that something children are really fond of. According to my observation and own teaching practice, young learners tend to paint/draw/scribble on the paper from time to time

when they attend the class. Here is only one example from my Chinese heritage classroom (shown as pictures below). Students were asked to finish the pop quiz. When doing the text, they scribbled some words and pictures on the margin. Even I told them I would take away their points if their answer sheets were not neat, they still took risk and kept drawing on the paper.



Drawing, to some extent, is the common interest of young children. They like to use the way of drawing to express what they are keen on and what they are not. It is also salient that, in my classroom, students are distracted by the drawing when the teacher is instructing the language knowledge. Since young children are fond of drawing, I wonder if there is any method that teachers could merge drawing into language classroom.

As is known to all, Chinese characters were originated from pictogram (picture-like characters), it is entirely possible for young learners to learn Chinese or learn how to write Chinese characters by drawing.

I searched the source online finding that there are some pictures combining the Chinese characters with the pictures. These pictures on the internet incorporate Chinese characters to illustrate the meaning of the pictures and words. As for me, visual attraction could give young learners the incentives to learn that language.

In my specific Chinese language classroom of teaching writing Chinese characters, I encouraged students to merge the drawing into writing. By the way of drawing, it would be conducive for the students to memorize the strokes, the order of strokes in characters. Pictures are shown as below.



Adapted from <http://club.china.com/>

- (1) Ask students to see what these pictures are about.
- (2) Ask students to find Chinese characters in these pictures.
- (3) Ask student to draw out the pictures, then write the correspondent Chinese character(s) below the picture they draw.

Students were very excited about this activity. When I said, “you could pick out the Chinese characters and draw that picture out.” All the students responded, “Yes! Oh! Yay.” When students were drawing, I required them to draw the pictures in accordance with the order of each stroke in Chinese characters. They did not feel bored when drawing and writing. Instead, they showed eagerness and passion toward drawing. The more conscientiously children focused on drawing, the deeper understanding (e.g structure of the character, order of the stroke, etc) children would have on each Chinese character. After drawing, I encouraged the students to think about how many characters we covered today and what they were. By means of the glamour of drawing, young learners happily recounted the Chinese characters they learnt in that class session.

Teachers could get bunch of ideas from young learners themselves, what they are fond of; what they would like to do in the classroom. It is vital for the teachers to be an open-minded listener/observer that pays attention to the students’ classroom behavior as opposed to a dominant instructor that takes the lead in the whole class. In my specific classroom, drawing, as I mentioned above, is a breakthrough for young learners to be attracted and focused in the language classroom. It is critical to make your class more energetic and more colorful.

#### 4. Closing Remarks

Young learners who are immersed in early bilingual education may be faced with some problems. In this article, I have been talking about how to cope with the issue that young learners easily get bored in Chinese heritage language classroom. Sometimes we could replace the monotonous teacher-fronted instruction with some more appealing contents and materials. Interesting contents like culture story-telling, painting and drawing as I illustrated above could be integrated into language teaching/learning to attract students' attention.

Many heritage language learners discontinue their learning at early age. When they grow up, they realize its importance to take up the heritage language class. So, in the classroom, appropriate teaching practice that incentivizes and enlivens young learners to proceed their native language learning is the keystone to maintain and transmit the heritage language/culture among young children. Let students learn something with fun in the language classroom. Let them know that language learning is not only an academic subject but also a communication tool that they can apply to the real practice.

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