A Conceptual Paper: Teaching Strategies of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language among International Students in China

Chuyang Zhang and Wong Siew Ping

Abstract – **As mainland China's global influence expands, there has been a notable increase in the influx of international students to the country. Despite the early inception of TCFL (Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language), there has been a dearth of advocacy and initiatives for pedagogical reform since the 1980s. Presently, the prevailing model in most classrooms of TCFL remains teacher-centered, a paradigm that exhibits numerous shortcomings, notably a lack of student engagement stemming from uninspiring instructional environments. This deficiency is particularly pronounced within the speaking classrooms of TCFL. The constructivist perspective on pedagogy asserts that effective teaching can be facilitated by crafting meaningful tasks or challenges that empower learners as active participants in the learning process. TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching) involves the design and orchestration of a series of tasks by the instructor, enabling students to attain language learning objectives. Diverging from the conventional teacher-centered approach, task-based language teaching prioritizes the cultivation of students' independent cognitive agency. Past research indicates that classrooms utilizing TBLT methodologies demonstrate promise in bolstering the motivation of international students studying in China and enhancing overall learning outcomes. It is recommended to employ a case study methodology involving the selection of international students for interview sessions. The collected data will undergo thematic analysis to extract meaningful patterns and insights.**

Keywords – **Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, Teaching Strategies, Task-Based Language Teaching, Learning Motivation, Thematic Analysis**

I. INTRODUCTION

As mainland China's international influence continues to grow, Chinese is becoming a favoured language for students around the world. According to the latest statistics from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2019), a total of 492,185 international students went to study in higher education institutions in mainland China in 2018, with the number of students showing an upward trend from the previous year. Li and Qu (2021) sorted out the development of TCFL in New China. TCFL in New China began in 1950, and the early TCFL was mainly preparatory education, small in scale, serving foreign exchanges between socialist countries, and with strong political implications. In 1989, mainland China opened up the restriction of colleges and universities to

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independently enroll foreign students and allowed students to come to China to study at their own expense. This initiative enriched the source structure of students coming to China and greatly increased the number of international students coming to China. In 2004, the first Confucius Institute was set up in Seoul, which marked a further enhancement of the influence of the Chinese in the world. Overall, TCFL in New China is a process of developing from a predominantly preparatory education to a diversified education system.

TCFL education in mainland China has developed for more than 70 years and has made many achievements. However, since the 1980s, TCFL has seen little voice and action for pedagogical reform, which is not in line with the regular pattern of disciplinary construction and needs to sound the alarm (Li, 2020). There are some urgent improvements in TCFL. The first one is the teaching mode, Zong (2016) points out that the mainstream teaching mode of TCFL in mainland China is still the "comprehensive + small four" mode moulded in the 1980s, which means intensive reading + speaking + listening + extensive reading + writing. Although some scholars have proposed a more progressive model of "teaching by skills" on its basis, this model is still subject to different debates and has not been widely recognised and applied. Lu (2017) argues that " comprehensive + small four " is an immature model that fails to deal with the coordination and articulation between integrated courses and "small four" and has not found a feasible method for many years. In addition, the curriculum has long lacked design, and the organisers and leaders of teaching and learning have lacked the necessary skills and knowledge of the curriculum, and the pedagogical approach to the lessons in this model was rudimentary. Si's (2017) study shows that although there are teaching models based on second language acquisition theory appearing at this stage, the teaching model centred on grammar teaching and focusing on knowledge input is still the mainstream. Zhu (2020) makes a more violent criticism of the TCFL classroom. The researcher argues that the vast majority of TCFL classrooms in mainland China do not have students as the centre of classroom teaching, and that teachers rely excessively on textbooks, read from the same book, lack innovation, and routinely ignore the individual differences of their students, which leads to inefficiency in the classroom. Secondly, the teaching materials, most of the TCFL teaching materials used in major universities nowadays are small repairs to some classic teaching materials, boring and lack of changes and innovations in line with the new era (Sun, 2018). In addition, under the influence of commercial operation, the publishers of TCFL textbooks excessively pursue economic benefits

and thus deviate from the educational goals, and there are deficiencies in compilation and publication, with greater pitfalls in terms of knowledge, professionalism and practicability (Liu et al., 2021). Taken together, many scholars have revealed their concerns about the current situation of TCFL education.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

According to Sun (2013), the fundamental purpose of TCFL is to cultivate students' communicative competence in Chinese, speaking as the main form of communication, is the most important part of language skills training. Therefore, it is not too much to pay extra attention to the speaking class, and it is not too much to rank it as the first-class type. In the TCFL classroom, the teaching of speaking has always been a difficult challenge to overcome, and the existing teaching mode in the classroom is still based on the teacher's (grammatical knowledge) lecturing/speaking demonstration, and the students follow the traditional mode of practice. This mode is effective in the primary stage of learning, but the single format will make students lack the opportunity of independent practice and classroom communication, resulting in a lack of learning initiative and a lack of backbone in the intermediate and advanced stages (Liu, 2021). In fact, the problem of students' weak listening and speaking ability is common in TCFL in China's colleges and universities (Luan, 2017). Hao (2014) pointed out that the current situation of teaching Chinese as a foreign language in speaking class is that insufficient attention to the teaching of phonetics and too much emphasis on grammar explanation while ignoring the corresponding training. In the primary stage of oral teaching, many teachers spend only two weeks teaching pronunciation, and in the intermediate and advanced stages, the teaching of phonetics is almost zero, which leads to the "foreign accent" students everywhere. In addition, many teachers take up a lot of class time to explain grammar, and the explanation is too academic, which makes it difficult for students to understand and have no time to practise, and ultimately, they cannot use it flexibly.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of second language classroom interaction began in the 1960s, and according to Tsui's (2001) suggestion, the classroom can be studied from three main perspectives, like input, output (the language produced by the learners in the classroom), and interaction (the interrelationship between input and output). TBLT is a process-based pedagogy with a theoretical basis in the input and interaction hypothesis (Ellis, 1999) and especially the interaction approach (Long, 2015). Task-based classrooms place students in meaningful 'tasks' (Huang & Gandhioke, 2021), providing learners with the opportunity to receive modified, comprehensible input and interactive feedback (Ziegler, 2016). Learners need to understand, produce and interact with the target language (Nunan, 1989) to facilitate second language learning.

Littlewood (2014) points out that in the last two decades, many discussions in communicative linguistics have referred to TBLT as a branch of the communicative approach, which has now become a new 'orthodox' theory. Briefly outlined, TBLT method refers to "teaching activities that are student-centred, with teachers designing specific activities with clear objectives, so that students can achieve their learning objectives through negotiation and discussion using the target language" (Zhou, 2017). At the beginning of this century, Wu (2005) exhibited his recognition of TBLT, which he regarded as meaningful activities with clear communicative goals and always student-centred. Zheng and Li's (2016) experiments showed that the TBLT method was superior to the traditional teaching method in teaching speaking skills in TCFL, and the students improved their speaking accuracy and fluency. Based on the TBLT method, Zhao (2021) designed the teaching link of the lesson "Low Carbon Teaching", and after evaluating three students, it proved that the task-based teaching method applied to the advanced Chinese speaking class was feasible and effective and could help students improve their oral communication skills. Chen (2021) and Fang (2020) also designed the beginner's speaking class "Talking about Shopping" and the intermediate speaking class "I am addicted to online shopping" based on the TBLT method. Both of them affirm the value of the TBLT method. It can be seen that the TBLT method is highly compatible with foreign Chinese-speaking classes, and its importance is self-evident.

The Chinese authoritative textbook Fundamentals of Education (2014, P.224) clearly defines teaching strategy as "a series of executive processes of regulating and controlling teaching activities based on a clear understanding of the teaching activities to achieve the teaching purposes and complete the teaching tasks." Its meaning includes the metacognitive process of teaching activities, the regulatory process of teaching activities, and the execution process of teaching methods. In other words, teaching strategies allow teachers to flexibly select appropriate teaching methods and teaching contents, regulate teaching activities according to relevant situations, and finally solve teaching problems and achieve teaching goals.

Teaching strategy is a hot issue in contemporary teaching research, and scholars both at home and abroad present some commonalities and show many differences in their definitions. According to Xi's (2021) collation of teaching strategies at home and abroad, their basic characteristics include comprehensiveness, operability, flexibility and hierarchy. According to the recommendations of Fundamentals of Education (2014), the basis for developing and selecting teaching strategies is as follows. First of all, based on the specific goals and tasks of teaching. Secondly, based on the characteristics of the teaching content. Thirdly, based on the actual situation of the students. Fourth, based on teachers' qualifications. Fifth, based on the requirements of teaching time and efficiency.

IV. METHOD

The key to examining teaching strategies is how they enhance students' motivation to learn. Qualitative research findings are rich in descriptive and interpretive qualities, which are more conducive to understanding the phenomena and meanings from the participants' perspectives (Merriam, 2002), and are more in line with the purpose of the textual research. The research methodology of this study is a case study. Specific methods include interviews, focus groups, and observation. Interviews are particularly effective in understanding what participants really think (Guerin et al., 1999), and allow the researcher to obtain in-depth information around relevant topics. Focus groups are highly manipulative, providing an opportunity for sharing and comparison, as well as giving a 'human face' to the statistics (Valenzuela & Shrivastava, 2002) and helping to guide the construction of individual interview topics (Freitas et al., 1998). Focus groups and interviews are often paired, with the former having more breadth and the latter having more depth, and the combination of the two can lead to more plausible conclusions (Morgan, 1996). Observational methods can provide the researcher with the opportunity to examine non-verbal expressions of emotion, and its use in this study as an adjunct research method helped the researcher to better understand the context and phenomena of the study (Kawulich, 2005). The method of data analysis used in this study is Thematic Analysis (TA), which is one of the most flexible methods of analysis in qualitative research, a method of extracting meanings and concepts from data that can be in any form including: interview transcripts, field notes, etc (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). An important reason for choosing thematic analysis is its suitability for analysing data at two different stages, for instance, before and after data. In addition, thematic analysis is also very effective when research attempts to examine the impact on learners' attitudes (Alhojailan, 2012).

The study will select 12 research participants through "purposive sampling", which focuses on people with specific characteristics that will better aid the study (Etikan et al., 2016). Factors to be considered for the participants include gender, whether they have relatives who are native Chinese speakers (Chinese nationals), students at different levels, etc. Two rounds of semi-structured interviews (at the beginning and the end of the semester) will be conducted with each of the 12 research participants to validate the effectiveness of the teaching strategies. The first round of interviews will contain feedback on their motivation, confusion about current speaking learning, and perceptions of the speaking classroom, which will provide directions for optimising the teaching strategies. The second round of interviews will focus more on motivation and perceptions of the effectiveness of the classroom designed by the instructional strategies to validate the effectiveness of the strategies. In addition, the second sample of research participants will include an additional "random sample" of six students who will participate in a focus group at the end of the study to help evaluate the effectiveness of the study

(Gibbs, 1997). The authors also plan to observe at least two study participants for a period of time that roughly encompasses waking up in the morning and going to bed in the evening. The researchers expect that a day together will provide insights into the international students' use of Chinese on campus, in the classroom, and off campus, which will help to understand their attitudes toward Chinese.

The location where this study will be carried out in an ordinary university, University T, in mainland China, which has about 300 international students, mostly from Uzbekistan, South Korea, Poland and African countries. The reason for choosing an average rather than an "excellent" school is that international students at top universities are mostly self-disciplined and study on their own after class, even if they are less involved in class, so it may not be representative. The researchers also want to find out whether the design of teaching strategies can enhance the motivation of international students who are average in Chinese language learning. The researchers will conduct two data collection sessions to find out the extent of participants' motivation to learn in order to determine the feasibility of the teaching strategies. Choosing a school that has a wide range of international students is sufficient for this study, and the researcher can choose students from different countries for the control study.

V. CONCLUSION

Although TBLT methods began in English language teaching, their effectiveness in Chinese language classrooms has also been confirmed in the process of "localisation". Many studies have shown that a classroom based on task-based pedagogy can help to enhance the motivation and learning effect of students coming to China. Therefore, focusing on TBLT methodology and developing teaching strategies for Chinese speaking classes for international students will have a positive impact on their motivation to learn.

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