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DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING A TANDEM LANGUAGE LEARNING (TLL) PROGRAM FOR LEARNERS OF CHINESE AND ENGLISH USING THE SOCIAL MEDIA APP QQ

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In this chapter, we discuss our experiences designing and implementing an online Tandem Language Learning (TLL) program for university undergraduate-level learners of Chinese and English. Our TLL program, called the Chinese Corner/English Corner, involved native English-speaker learners of Chinese in Australia and native Chinese-speaker learners of English in China interacting via the social media app QQ to learn each other's languages. We first explain the rationale for establishing a TLL program for these two groups of language learners, then describe the learning activities we designed and the principles which informed them. Following this, we discuss the benefits for students of the Chinese Corner/English Corner; namely, active engagement, substantial use of the target language, sustained participation, increased knowledge and understanding of the target language culture, and flexibility of access.

We offer our experience in the hope it will benefit language teachers who need to shift their teaching activities online in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, where learning cannot take place in physical space. Our experience is relevant here

because the Chinese Corner/English Corner had originally run in face-to-face mode but had to be shifted to online mode because of a decrease in enrollments of English-language learners of Chinese background at Flinders University. QQ was a suitable solution because it allowed an international collaboration in which Flinders University's Chinese language learners could interact with English language learners at the University of Jinan without the need for students to be physically present in the same location.

The Rationale for TLL

Research suggests there are a number of ingredients that are either essential to, or contribute significantly toward, successful second language acquisition (SLA). These are: exposure to the language; opportunities to use the language in meaningful, communicative interactions; explicit attention to language forms; and feedback on learning.¹ Successful SLA is determined by the amount, type, and quality of these ingredients available within the context in which SLA takes place, and the use learners make of them.

A distinction is often drawn between second language (SL) contexts and foreign language (FL) contexts. An SL context is a situation in which the target language is widely used in the community outside of the language classroom. An FL context, on the other hand, is a situation in which the target language is not often, or usually, used in the community outside the language classroom.² In reality, SL and FL contexts are not absolutes but form a continuum, "ranging from high-visibility, ready access to the target language outside the language classroom to little access beyond the classroom door."³ With this caveat in mind, it is reasonable to say Chinese language learners in Australia and English language learners in China are both in an FL context. The nature of this context poses challenges to their learning.

While the language classroom does provide explicit attention to language forms and feedback on learning, exposure to the target language and opportunities to use it in meaningful, communicative interactions are typically limited. The classroom cannot expose learners to the target language for all purposes or functions, and the interaction that takes place in the classroom is not always meaningful or communicative (for example, the repetition of a new vocabulary item or grammar structure). In addition, contact is usually only a small number of hours per week, and the teacher is often the only proficient speaker with whom learners have regular contact.⁴ In our teaching experience, this applies to learners of Chinese in Australia and learners of English in China.

We saw TLL as a way to address this challenge. According to O'Rourke, TLL is "an arrangement in which two native speakers of different languages communicate regularly with one another, each with the purpose of learning the other's language."⁵

We called our TLL program the Chinese Corner/English Corner, an adaptation of the English Corner commonly found in China. An English Corner is a gathering of English language learners in a park, square, or university campus to practice speaking English together; it also sometimes involves native speakers of English. We hoped this would be a familiar practice to Chinese learners of English and also Australian learners of Chinese who had gained some knowledge of China through their studies.

Designing the Online Chinese Corner/English Corner

We chose the social media app QQ as the platform for our TLL program and designed a series of connected information exchange tasks to guide interactions between the two groups of learners involved.

The Social Media App QQ

QQ was developed by the Chinese technology company Tencent. It was originally an instant messaging service, then expanded to provide services such as games, shopping, microblogging, and group and voice chat. It is now one of the most widely used social media apps in China and is also available internationally. It can be used on a PC, iPad, or mobile phone.

We established an online conversation space on QQ, in which students met and had weekly conversations using the voice live interaction and messaging functions. First, students were asked to register a QQ account if they did not already have one. We established a QQ group called “Flinders University-University of Jinan Chinese Corner/English Corner,” and students were notified of the group name and required to join by searching for the group name on QQ. Twenty-three English language learners from the University of Jinan and six Chinese language learners from Flinders University joined the group. The Chinese language learners were second- and third-year undergraduates who had not studied Chinese prior to commencing university. The English language learners were second-year undergraduates who had previously studied English in primary and high school. Due to the difference in learner numbers, we further divided them into six subgroups, each containing one Chinese language learner and three or four English language learners. Each of these groups had a separate subgroup within the larger QQ group. The Flinders University Chinese language tutor (one of the authors) was the manager of all groups, monitored their interactions, and provided feedback and suggestions for improvement.

There were some minor technical and organizational issues because some learners at both universities had difficulty locating and logging into the QQ group. These were resolved relatively easily through communication between Flinders and University of Jinan staff, and the technology functioned well for the duration of the Chinese Corner/English Corner.

We chose QQ because of its availability in both China and Australia, and because Chinese university students were already familiar with it. However, this arrangement could be replicated on other social media platforms, providing they have voice live interaction and messaging functions. Another option for running a TLL with students in China is WeChat. If the TLL was to be run with Chinese and English learners outside of China, possibilities would include WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. It could also be replicated through online teaching platforms such as Collaborate or Zoom.

Materials Design

We designed a series of tasks to guide interactions between learners. Tasks that require learners to exchange information about a topic are an effective means of producing exposure to the language and meaningful, communicative interactions.⁶ We therefore developed tasks around topics relevant to students' lives and experiences, and which would generate discussion about similarities and differences between China and Australia. Each learner would have information about the topic from their own perspective and experience and would need to use their target language to communicate this to their partners, as well as to learn about their partner's perspective and experience on the topic.

As we were aware that Chinese language learners would have a lower level of proficiency in their target language than their English language learner counterparts, we aimed the tasks at different levels of complexity. The tasks for Chinese language learners were "Self-Introduction," "Age, Chinese Zodiac, and Western Star Signs," "My Family and My Country," "Shopping and Online Shopping," and "Travels and Wishes." The English language learners were given the tasks of introducing themselves, explaining significant birthdays in Chinese culture, discussing forms of identification and licenses in China, comparing shopping centers in China to those in Australia, and explaining the procedures for seeing a doctor in China. Each task was intended to build on the previous one by expanding from the individual learner to the broader world.

We included model conversations in Chinese and English which highlighted new and important words and phrases that would be useful for the conversations. Learners could then use similar sentences to conduct their conversations with their partners. We also included useful words and phrases for arranging a time to conduct the conversation, as well as ones for canceling and rearranging a time. We did this because research demonstrates that planning can have a positive effect on successful task completion and fluency of language use during the task.⁷ There were five tasks altogether, each of which followed the same structure. An example task worksheet is included in the appendix.

All participants were required to use Chinese when the Chinese language learners were performing their task, and all participants were likewise required

to use English when the English language learners were performing their task. The Flinders University Chinese language tutor monitored language use to ensure both groups of learners had the same opportunities to use their target language.

Implementing the Chinese Corner/English Corner

Five sessions of the online Chinese Corner/English Corner took place over as many weeks. TLL programs are usually evaluated by learners' perceptions of their learning and improvements in their language proficiency.⁸ However, determining whether participation in the Chinese Corner/English Corner improved language proficiency was complicated because the tasks were focused primarily on the expression of meaning, and the peer-to-peer conversations involved a more fluid way of learning than a usual classroom situation. In light of this, we focus here on learners' perceptions of the benefits of participation and our own perceptions as their tutors and course coordinator. We draw on our observations of learners' conversations, learners' comments to us, and our own reflections to discuss the benefits of the Chinese Corner/English Corner.

There were several benefits to learners. First, they were very interested in the task content, and because of this, they engaged actively in the Chinese Corner/English Corner. This is demonstrated by the fact that the conversations in all groups lasted much longer than we expected, each taking around thirty minutes. Learners would often go beyond the set task and discuss related topics. For example, in session 2, learners not only identified their own Chinese and Western horoscope sign, but also asked questions about their partners'. English language learners who knew more about the Chinese horoscope explained the characteristics of its twelve animals to their partners in English, while those Chinese language learners with higher levels of Chinese proficiency were able to explain a little about the personality traits associated with their Chinese star sign.⁹

Another example of learners' desire to continue the conversations with their partners occurred in session 5. One Chinese language learner explained the process of seeing a physician in Australia in Chinese to his English language learner partners. One such learner responded, "I didn't know it's so troublesome to see a doctor in Australia. In China, you can just walk into a hospital. There is a board in the entry hall with all doctors' photos and what they specialize in. You can pick one and pay a registration/admission fee. Then the doctor will see you."¹⁰ It was encouraging to see this level of participation still occurring in the final session of the Chinese Corner/English Corner. Even during the exam period, there were two groups who continued with the set tasks and also talked about how they performed during the exam and how difficult the essay questions were.

Students also expressed they had learned much about the target language culture from the model conversations and the conversations carried out with their

partners. For example, in session 3, “My Family and Country,” the English model conversation featured an Australian university student who addressed his father as “John” and his lecturer as “Maggie.” In the Chinese model conversation, on the other hand, a Chinese university student addressed her professor as “Li Jiaoshou” (李教授 Professor Li) and her friend’s father as “Wang Shushu” (王叔叔 Uncle Wang). Many English language learners were surprised by the model conversation and asked their partner if it was true that one can call their father by his given name at home in Australia.¹¹ Similar content, such as model conversations of appropriate and inappropriate compliments and questions in Chinese and English, all generated great discussions.

Learners also felt that the online Chinese Corner/English Corner offered them flexibility because there was no set time for the groups to conduct their conversations. As long as they completed the tasks within the week, they could do it at any time that was convenient for them.¹² Group members could negotiate with each other to set a time to conduct their conversations, and this negotiation was an opportunity to practice their target language. Similarly, learners felt the online tasks were focused and easy to follow. One Chinese language learner said, “the online material is much easier to follow,” and added, “our partners will explain [the meaning] of the new words if I have trouble [understanding them].”¹³

The Chinese Corner/English Corner’s provision of exposure to the target language and opportunities to use it in meaningful, communicative interactions clearly benefited learners.

Conclusion

Designing and implementing a TLL program for learners of Chinese and English led to positive results in terms of learner engagement, use of the target language, sustained participation, and increased knowledge and understanding of the target language culture. The online format also provided learners with flexibility. Our Chinese Corner/English Corner experience can be useful in a wide variety of learning environments, especially where such a pedagogical approach is necessitated by COVID-19.

We see three possible applications of this to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, teachers could use the Chinese Corner/English Corner as a supplement to their existing curriculum. Native English-speaker learners of Chinese and native Chinese-speaker learners of English could be recruited internationally or locally, depending on circumstances. In either case, the Chinese Corner/English Corner could operate as we have described in this chapter. A second possibility is that teachers incorporate the Chinese Corner/English Corner into their curriculum. This could be done by designing tasks around the content of their curriculum (i.e., tasks that cover the subject matter, vocabulary, grammar,

and cultural content of the curriculum), then requiring learners to undertake them at set times during the course. Opportunities for learners to reflect on their performance of and learning from tasks could also be given during regular classes. Third, teachers who do not want or are unable to establish a TLL program could still use QQ (or another platform) and the task structure we described here to teach their existing curriculum online. This would involve creating information exchange tasks based on the content of their curriculum and requiring their learners to perform them online. The process of setting up an online conversation space and designing the tasks we outlined will be useful for those who choose to pursue this option. All three applications provide opportunities for language learning and teaching to continue in the context of a global pandemic.

Notes

¹ H. Douglas Brown, *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching: A Course in Second Language Acquisition* (6th ed.) (White Plains: Pearson Longman, 2014), chapter 10; Rod Ellis, *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* (2nd ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), chapters 6–8; Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada, *How Languages Are Learned* (4th ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 4.

² Muriel Saville-Troike, *Introducing Second Language Acquisition* (2nd ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4.

³ H. Douglas Brown and Heekyeong Lee, *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (4th ed.) (White Plains: Pearson Longman, 2015), 161.

⁴ Lightbown and Spada, *How Languages are Learned*, chapter 5.

⁵ Breffni O'Rourke, "Form-Focused Interaction in Online Tandem Learning," *CALICO Journal* 22, no. 3 (2005): 433–466, 434.

⁶ David Nunan, *Task-Based Language Teaching* (Revised ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chapter 4.

⁷ Nunan, *Task-Based Language Teaching* (Revised ed.), chapter 6.

⁸ David Little and Ema Ushioda, "Designing, Implementing and Evaluating a Project in Tandem Language Learning Via Email," *ReCALL* 10, no. 1 (1998): 95–101, 99.

⁹ Learners' conversation, session 2.

¹⁰ Learners' conversation, session 5.

¹¹ Learners' conversation, session 3.

¹² Comment to Chinese language tutor.

¹³ Comment to Chinese language tutor.

Appendix: Example Task Sheet

Teacher's Notes: The goal of this task is for students to conduct a conversation about their personal experiences with shopping and/or online shopping. Students will learn words and phrases related to shopping in context. Students will also learn about different ways of shopping and shopping habits in Australia and China.

Session Four: Shopping and Online Shopping

四：购物与网购

gòuwù yǔ wǎnggòu

[note: 购物 general shopping, a more formal expression compared with 买东西; 网 net, Internet; 网购 online shopping, can be used as a noun or verb, e.g.: 我喜欢网购。我网购了一本书]

Task in Chinese: Show and tell your partner something you bought recently or a long time ago. Describe the thing you bought, how much you spent, where you bought it, and recommend your partner some good places for shopping online or at actual shops. The conversation can be carried out like this. You can of course change the time and the object.

XX, 我前天买了一本书。(XX, I bought a book the day before yesterday.)
什么名? (What's the name [of the book]?)

liángshānbó yǔ zhùyingtái

梁山伯与祝英台。(Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai).

wà

哇! 你也喜欢这本书啊?! (Wow! You also like this book?!) [note: 哇 a particle to express that you are surprised.]

tuījiàn

是啊, 我们中文老师推荐的。(Yeah, our Chinese teacher recommended it.)

[note: 推荐 to recommend].

gānggāng luómì'ōu zhūliè

好巧啊! 我们英语老师也刚刚推荐了罗密欧与朱丽叶。(What a coincidence! Our English teacher also just recommended *Romeo and Juliet*.)

[note: 刚刚 just]

bùtóng wénhuà què jiǎngshù xiāngsìde àiqínggùshi

两本书, 不同的文化, 却讲述了相似的爱情故事。(Two books, different cultures, but told similar love stories.) [note: 不同的 different; 却 but; 讲述 to tell; 相似的 similar; 爱情 love; 故事 story]

tǐng huā

是啊，挺有意思的。对了，你花了多少钱？在哪儿买的？(Exactly, that's quite interesting. By the way, how much did you spend? Where did you buy it?) [note: 挺quite; 花 spent; 在哪儿买的is a simple way of saying, "Where did you buy this book?"]

piányiba yàmǎxùn wǎnggòu

十五块。便宜吧！我在网上买的 or 我上网买的，亚马逊。你喜欢网购吗？(15 yuan. Isn't it cheap! I bought it online, amazon.com. Do you like shopping online?)[note: 便宜 cheap; 吧 here indicates the speaker wants to get agreement on his/her statement; it can also be used when you want to show off something. Eg: 漂亮吧！Isn't it beautiful!; 在网上 on internet; 上网 go online, same meaning; or you can say: 我在亚马逊网购的。网购 here is a verb.]

dehuà yìbān dāngdāngwǎng

喜欢啊！买书的话，我一般上当当网。(I do! If buying a book, I normally go to dangdang.com) [note: ... 的话 if...; 一般 usually, normally; 当当网a popular online bookstore in China; Pay attention that you use the verb '上'for going online.]

táobǎowǎng xìngjiàbìgāo

买衣服的话，我一般上淘宝网，性价比高。(If buying clothes, I usually go to taobao.com, good value for money.) [note: 淘宝网 taobao.com which is a bit like ebay.com; 性价比高good value for money]

huàzhuāngpǐn jiǎhuò

但是化妆品我一般去大商场，淘宝假货太多。(But for cosmetics, I usually go to big department stores, taobao fake products are too many.) [note: 化妆品 cosmetics, makeup; 假货fake products, unauthentic products].

jīngcháng wǎnggòu

你们澳大利亚人也经常 网购吗？(Are you Australians also often shopping online?) [note:经常 often]

fāngbiàn chāoshì dōngxī dànshì bāoyóu

是啊，经常。网购很方便。超市的 东西也可以网购，但是 不包邮。(Yes, often. Online shopping is very convenient. Supermarket products can be also bought online, but postage is not included.) [note: 方便convenient; 超市 super-market; 东西 things, products; 但是 but; 包邮 include postage]

Task in English: Ask your partner about grocery shopping in China, big supermarket chains, shops, restaurants, department stores, and trading hours on weekdays and public holidays. Also tell your partner something about Australian retailers such as Woolworths, Coles, Foodland, Westfield Shopping Centre, Myer, David Jones, Priceline, Harvey Norman, etc.