"It's a lonely journey": Experiences of students learning Chinese as a foreign language at South African universities

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Abstract

China's global position has led to a growing demand for Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) worldwide. This development is observable in South Africa where four universities offer CFL courses. However, due to the absence of a substantial Chinese-speaking community and related linguistic resources, South African students study CFL in an isolated language environment with limited communicative opportunities. This creates a "lonely" language learning experience for students despite their clear motivation to learn Chinese. Informed by sociolinguistic theories, this paper reports on a qualitative inquiry into the experiences of CFL students in South African universities. This inquiry involved conducting interviews with purposefully selected CFL students, and it explored their personal experiences in their learning of Chinese. The findings of the study include class scheduling and tutor support, communication inside and outside the classroom, the emotional dimensions of language learning, academic '"push and pull' and the particular challenges of CFL acquisition. Recommendations are made to improve CFL teaching and learning in the South African and African context. These include the use of computer generated language resources to enhance the study of Chinese; the recruitment of Chinese-speaking residents who are willing to provide CFL students with at-home visits; and the provision of student exchanges between Chinese and South African universities.

Key words: Chinese as a Foreign Language, South Africa, universities, foreign language learning, external second language setting, socio-linguistic theories, qualitative inquiry.

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Introduction

China's role as a world economic power has led to a growing interest in the country, and a significant demand to learn Mandarin Chinese as a second, foreign or additional language by non-native speakers throughout the world (Wang, Maloney & Li, 2013). This fact is illustrated by increasing enrolment figures of non-native speakers in Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) courses. There is also an increasing demand for competent teachers of Chinese outside China. According to the Annual Report of the Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, commonly known as Hanban (2012), there were 655,000 registered students of Chinese courses and more than 20,000 full-time and part-time teachers of CFL outside China in 2012.

An interest in CFL is also observable in several African countries (Youngman, 2014, p.19). South Africa, the focus of this paper, represents a language learning context geographically distant and culturally distinct from China (Wang and Lemmer, 2013; Wang, 2013). The Chinese-speaking community is very small, estimated at between 350,000 and 500,000 (Park, 2012) from a population of 53 million residents (Statistics South Africa, 2013). The motivation for CFL provision in higher education can be traced back to strategic trade relations, initially between South Africa and Taiwan in the early 1990s, and more recently between South Africa and China. The importance of language diversity is captured in the South African policy framework for language in higher education and addresses the following four issues: languages of instruction in higher education, the future of South African languages as fields of academic study and research, the promotion of multilingualism in institutional policies, and the study of foreign languages (FLs) (Ministry of Education of South Africa, 2002). Tuition policy in FLs in higher education is linked to the languages needed to promote the country's cultural, trade and diplomatic relations (Ministry of Education of South Africa, 2002). It is in this light that the provision of CFL in South African higher education, which has achieved greater importance in the last twenty-five years, should be understood.

To date, four major South African universities offer courses in CFL: the University of South Africa (UNISA), Stellenbosch University (SU), Rhodes University (RU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT). Rhodes University, the University of Cape Town and the University of South Africa (UNISA) offer CFL at first, second and third-year levels in their undergraduate degree programmes. UNISA is the largest distance education university in southern Africa and CFL tuition there is through printed or electronic instructional material complemented by audio-recordings. Stellenbosch University, a predominantly Afrikaans-medium institution, offers both a BA and an Honours degree in CFL (Wang, 2013). The latter was introduced in 2012 (Zhao, 2012). Three of these four South African universities (Stellenbosch, Rhodes and Cape Town) enjoy the support provided by the Confucius Institute (i.e. a non-profit Chinese-language learning institution established and funded by the Hanban) on their campuses (Feng, 2008).

Curricula documents and marketing materials of the respective institutions use the terms Chinese, Mandarin or Mandarin Chinese differently; the nomenclature used by each respective university has therefore been used in this paper. Unisa and UCT uses the term 'Mandarin Chinese'; SU uses 'Mandarin'; and Rhodes uses 'Chinese Studies'. Elsewhere, the umbrella term "Chinese" has been used to refer to the standard language spoken in China (Lytra and Martin, 2010). The term "Chinese as a Foreign Language" (CFL) is used to refer to Chinese language acquired by non-native speakers.

The aim of this paper is to report on a qualitative inquiry which explored the experiences of students enrolled in CFL programmes in the above-mentioned four South African universities.

The inquiry formed part of a mixed-method study which constituted doctoral research (Wang, 2013); only the qualitative phase of the original study as it relates to the experiences of South African students is discussed in this paper.

Conceptual framework

The terms "foreign language" (FL) and "second language" (SL) are often used interchangeably in the literature on language acquisition, although at times foreign language is subsumed under the term second language (Healy, 1998; Saville-Troike, 2012). Similarly, this variability in terminology can be observed in the terms (not necessarily synonymous) used by authors when referring to standard Chinese as acquired by non-native speakers, namely Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) and Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL).

Fashold and Connor-Linton (2006) make reference to geographical location of speech communities to distinguish between a foreign and a second language: a language spoken outside the national or territorial borders is termed an FL. An additional language spoken inside the national or territorial boundaries is termed a second language. While also utilising this geographical marker of a FL or a SL, Crystal (2010) adds the domains of language use and of language status as differentiating features. Accordingly, a SL is a language, other than mother tongue or first language, used in a country for a special purpose in a specific domain(s). An example is a SL which is used as the medium of instruction in the education system or in government. This type of SL enjoys a high status owing to its use in the key domains of society. A further distinction lies in the motivation for learning a FL versus a SL. A FL is usually learned for the purposes of travel, communication with native speakers and access to written content, such as literature or technical material, in the said language. In contrast, proficiency in a SL is essential for a person's optimal participation in a multilingual country (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In the context of this paper, Chinese is understood as a FL, and one with an exceptionally high degree of difficulty for non-native speakers (Xu, Chang, Zhang & Perfetti, 2013). Moreover, South African learners of Chinese encounter particular challenges as they have to learn the language in the virtual absence of a Chinese-speaking community. Acquiring other FL's in South Africa, such as German, Greek or Portuguese, is much easier as linguistic resources are embodied in substantial speech communities and the existence of schools dedicated to the children of native-speakers of these languages as well as learning materials, which are much more widely available than Chinese language resources.

Likewise, the terms "second language acquisition" (SLA) and "foreign language acquisition" (FLA) tend to be used interchangeably in literature, with an overwhelming preference for the term SLA amongst Western scholars (Healy, 1998). This generalised transference of SLA theory and practice has led to an oversimplified picture of the many differences and complexities embedded in FLA learning and teaching. This is also true of CFL learning and teaching. Meanwhile, studies on the acquisition of Chinese as a SL or as a FL published in the English language press are few (Jiang, 2009).

In the light of the gap in the literature on FL acquisition in general and on CFL acquisition in particular, Siegel's (2007) sociolinguistic theory of social context is appropriate as a theoretical framework for this study. Although Siegel (2007) relies on SL rather than FL as a general term, he makes a useful distinction among different language learning settings. Siegel (2007) identifies five broad sociolinguistic settings for SLA (Qi and Lemmer, 2014), of which two are relevant for this paper: The "external SL setting" and the "coexisting SL setting". In the external SL setting, usually SL learners are the speakers of a dominant language who, for a variety of reasons, wish to acquire

a language not generally used within their society. This may be a foreign language, a language spoken in a distant part of the same country, or a world language, that is a language used in many countries (Encarta, 1999, p.2146). In this case, learners have limited exposure to the SL outside of the classroom. An example is South Africans (who may be native speakers of any of the eleven official languages) learning Chinese in South Africa. In a coexisting SL setting, the SL coexists with the dominant language and is spoken in the immediate or nearby environment by a large proportion of the population. Both languages are used in similar domains by their respective speakers and enjoy similar status; thus, learners will find substantial exposure to the SL outside the classroom. For example, Xhosa-speaking South African citizens who are learning English in South Africa.

Siegel's sociolinguistic settings can be linked to a wide variety of models of SLA (and hence FLA) programmes (Baker, 2001 and 2007; Garcia, 2009; Mackey, 2008; Siegel, 2007). SLA educational programmes have two broad approaches. The first involves the monolingual programme where only one language is used in the classroom as a medium of instruction. The second involves the bilingual programme where two (or sometimes more) languages are used for instruction (Siegel, 2007, p.150). But both monolingual and bilingual programmes have further subcategories within them. In L1 monolingual programmes, the L1 is the medium of instruction and the L2 is the subject of classroom study. This may be illustrated by Australian instructors using English as the medium of instruction while teaching students who are learning Japanese as a subject. In L2 monolingual programmes, the L2 is the only medium of instruction, as found in submersion programmes in dominant L2 settings. This is typical of CFL teaching in China where instructors use Chinese as the medium of instruction while teaching it as a FL. Bilingual programmes, in which L1 and the SL both function strongly, are most common in dominant SL settings and in institutional SL settings where SL acquisition is essential for full social participation. A very common bilingual programme is the transitional programme (albeit in different forms) in which L1 is used to acquire initial literacy during primary schooling, while the SL is introduced as an additional language. Thereafter there is a gradual switch to SL as a medium of instruction for all school subjects (Baker, 2001). An excellent example is the language practice in South African schools where speakers of African languages are taught in mother tongue (or L1) for the first four years of school and shift to English in Grade 4. In this case the most desirable instructional environment is where the instructor is bilingual and code-switching to a classroom *lingua franca* is possible when deemed suitable (Metila, 2009).

Method

In this context, our interpretative design explored the experiences of CFL students enrolled in universities in South Africa. The participants were fourteen full-time students of CFL selected by purposeful sampling (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010) according to a predefined criterion: full-time enrolment in a CFL course at the respective institution (although the nomenclature of the courses and the levels of study in which participants were engaged varied from institution to institution). Purposeful sampling allows the identification of students who are able to provide rich and varied insights into a topic of inquiry which has hitherto been little researched (Wang, 2013). Since participants were not chosen in order to produce a sample representative of the larger population, no attempt was made to generalise the findings.

The CFL students in the sample were all South African citizens: nine were L1 English-speakers; four were L1 Afrikaans-speakers; one was a L1 Xhosa-speaker. The majority were female (10) in comparison with four males. Twelve (12) students were enrolled for the three-year

Bachelor's degree in which they had chosen CFL as an elective and two participants were enrolled for CFL courses for non-degree purposes. All participants were aged eighteen – twenty-five years.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews conducted in the comfortable setting of the university campus or at the participant's or chief researcher's (Wang) home, according to participant preference. A brief questionnaire recorded biographical information. The research purpose and process of data collection were explained and participation was voluntary, anonymous and confidential. In the data presentation pseudonyms are used to identify participant quotations. A flexible interview schedule was used to discuss topics identified in the literature and in CFL curricula and course material of the participating universities. All participants elected to use English for the interviews. Interviews were digitally recorded; the chief researcher's lengthy experience as a CFL teacher/lecturer in China and in South Africa and the participants' enthusiasm for the topic created rapport between interviewer and participants. Verbatim interview transcripts were made for analysis which took place during and after data collection. Analytic guidelines for grounded theory (Charmaz, 2011) were used with a certain degree of flexibility. These guidelines were threefold: line-by-line coding, axial coding and extensive memo writing. In this way, interpretative themes were developed and supported by verbatim extracts from the interviews. Cross-checking was done with participants where necessary, and intensive peer checking was conducted with the second researcher (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010).

Findings

Five main themes were identified: class scheduling and tutor support, communication inside and outside the classroom, the emotional dimensions of language learning, academic '"push and pull' and the particular challenges of CFL acquisition.

Class scheduling and tutor support

Most of the participants were full-time students in three-year undergraduate Bachelor's degree programmes and were studying CFL as an elective. Tuition time at the three residential universities ranged between three to five hours per week plus one or two hours of oral practice (UNISA does not hold on-campus classes). CFL classes were not scheduled exclusively in the mornings; they might be scheduled as late as 16:00-17:00 when students were tired and less able to engage in strenuous FL study. Separate classes were not offered to develop oral, listening, reading and composition skills. In all residential institutions, CFL was taught in a multifunctional lecture room where permanent visual displays are not practical. Class attendance was not 100%, particularly with regard to language tutorials, owing to timetable clashes with lectures in other subjects. Student enrolments over the three-year degree were also erratic, with striking differences in enrolments between first-year, second-year and third-year courses; numbers declined drastically as the levels increased. South African universities (with the exception of UNISA), appoint at least one tutor in addition to the lecturer to assist or supervise students, particularly to assist in the acquisition of oral skills. The tutor is usually a CFL lecturer or a suitable Chinese teacher appointed from outside the university, and tutoring occurs during a formal tutorial class held for one to two hours per week for all CFL students.

Communication inside and outside the classroom

Oral communication in the target language both inside and outside the classroom is an influential factor shaping the acquisition of conversational proficiency in Chinese. English is the medium of instruction during CFL tuition at all four institutions. Lecturers start to use Chinese as the medium

of instruction very gradually at the second- and third year levels. One of the interviewees called Tony, although already in his third year of study, confirmed this point: "They [lecturers] try to speak Mandarin but we do not know enough so they have to speak English. The other lecturer [of Mandarin] uses German. She used to live in Germany so she normally uses either English or German." Meanwhile, social interaction amongst students in the classroom is in English or, at times, in Afrikaans. One participant noted: "We use English. We never speak Chinese after class. Sometimes we practise for an oral, but that is maybe once a day, so it is not common."

Furthermore, it is very difficult for CFL students in South Africa to find a conversational partner(s) after class. Participants had to find less satisfying ways to expose themselves to the spoken language. Catherine commented: "I listen to it [Chinese] when I am in the car because I have Chinese CDs." Annie does likewise: "I listen to CDs and repeat. Just like that – listen and repeat." Participants mentioned the difficulty of identifying a Chinese-speaking peer with whom to practise Chinese outside of class. Jill mentioned: "It is difficult to find someone who can speak Mandarin. No Chinese friends." Even those students who have Chinese-speaking friends find it challenging to persuade them to converse in Chinese. Joy, a first-year CFL student, commented: "I do struggle. I have a few Chinese friends and Taiwanese friends [who were born and/or raised in South Africa] but most of them do not really speak Chinese or Taiwanese [sic]. If I speak Chinese, they will say, 'Why do you speak this? You can speak English!'" Ironically, it was found that Chinese friends also prefer the easier option of speaking English when interacting socially.

Understandably all participants lacked the confidence to use Chinese in class and in social settings. This was true for third-year students and even to Peter, who had ten years of study experience behind him. Mary lamented: "I do not have confidence to speak Chinese. Once I was in the Chinese market and a lot of people were speaking Chinese. It was so difficult to get myself to speak to them even if it was very simple conversation and I still did not really understand fully." However, many participants emphasised that they had made good progress in reading and writing skills. Tony noted that his CFL lecturers also emphasised reading and writing skills: "I feel the most important part for our lecturers is reading and writing. They did not teach us to speak in the first year. We have problems because many students cannot speak even in the third year, but they can read and write."

The emotional dimension of language learning

CFL study evoked a number of positive emotions in participants: enjoyment, excitement, warm appreciation of sympathetic lecturers and a sense of security engendered by lecturers' concern for their progress, all greatly encouraged language acquisition. Students who enjoy their studies persist with study and seek solutions to problems, even in the face of formidable challenges. Pastimes affiliated to Chinese, such as watching Chinese movies and television, added to the enjoyment of language learning. All participants commended their lecturers for their work ethic their rich knowledge. Lecturers' concern for student progress lent CFL students a sense of security and an emotional safety net, something that is essential in any form of FL learning.

Conversely, anxiety, lack of confidence, and disappointment frustrated participants' attempts to learn and shaped participants' decisions to continue CFL study. Participants reported that although they spent considerable time in intense study of their formal course material, they felt isolated. This sense of loneliness is more acute in a classroom where the relationship among the CFL students is not close. As students are involved in different study programmes and different subjects, they only meet at Chinese classes and do not know each other well. Linda and Lisa were in the 1st year Chinese class at SU, yet they were unsure of the class numbers and how many

students regularly attended the class. The journey towards CFL proficiency is a lonely one. Tony, a 3rd year student at SU, said: "I come from Cape Town. For me the greatest difficulty is that we do not have so many places to study Chinese. We only have the University of Cape Town and the University of Stellenbosch." Attendance at a summer camp in China for two and half weeks financed by the Confucius Institute made South African students at UCT and SU even more aware of the loneliness of their regular language learning experience. UCT student Nosi compared her learning experiences in China with that in South Africa:

> We don't see a lot of Chinese in South Africa. You have to seek them out. So there isn't an environment of learning Chinese. It is much easier in China because you are surrounded by Chinese. It is unlike South Africa - we are like a "foreign country". It is very difficult to learn for Chinese are not around you everywhere. We are only exposed to Chinese in the class and not outside of the class.

Peter has been studying CFL for more than ten years and has worked diligently at his Mandarin studies. He felt that his feelings of loneliness were more intense than that of other students:

> The journey is very lonely in South Africa. It is very, very lonely! When I took Mandarin at UNISA, I remember going for the exams at the big hall at the show grounds. There were maybe five or six people writing Mandarin with me. But on the second year level, in a hall of 3000 students, I was the only student writing MAN-202. I started the Mandarin because of the challenge. It was the mountain that no one else wants to climb. And the question is why don't people do it? I believe one of the answers which I never thought about in the beginning is that it is lonely. Unfortunately in South Africa I found that after many years' trying, I still struggle. I still can't make that jump. In spite of maximum inputs, there aren't enough resources to take me to that next step.

Participants found attempts to speak Chinese in class or in public were hindered by shyness and embarrassment. None had the confidence to converse in Chinese during the interviews irrespective of the length of their CFL study. Anxiety also reduces motivation to learn. When participants considered their slow progress, they frequently felt pangs of self-reproach and considered dropping out of CFL study.

Academic 'push and pull'

Participants were energised by a number of 'push and pull' factors: push created by pressure from lecturers in the form of regular homework assignments, formative tests and summative examinations, and pull encouraged by relevant and interesting course material. They welcomed regular assignments and examinations and even wished for additional work. Annie said: "But I think it might be also nice if we have, like a sort of test before the exam, so we can prepare for final exam. Yes! Yes!" Besides regular homework and testing, participants valued a disciplined learning environment created by institutional or lecturer requirements for regular class attendance, strict examination admission and firm deadlines for assignment submission. Phumi called for a bigger workload and stricter attention to class attendance:

> It is my personal opinion. I just think we are not pushed enough. Our culture is different from the Chinese culture. Students are not very diligent. Sometimes there are just less than half the students in the class. I think they need to make a rule like you have to attend or you lose 10%. How can you read fluently in a foreign language if you do not attend the class?

Participants were strongly motivated by instructional content relevant to their educational aspirations and useful in daily life. Accordingly, some textbook content was criticised as out-dated or irrelevant to their lives. John commented: "Sometimes content is little bit strange like we did something this year about raising animals. I do not think it is necessarily relevant. The other time we did public transport and renting a flat and that, of course, is more relevant."

"Pull" was created by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to study CFL. A fascination with Chinese culture was a strong intrinsic incentive. Participants mentioned a personal interest in Chinese Kung Fu, Tai Chi, calligraphy and Beijing opera as things that had caught their interest. All participants mentioned the increasing importance of Chinese worldwide and the improved prospects for employment that Chinese proficiency offered, agreeing that Chinese is a future world language and proficiency in Chinese would have an economic spinoff in the workplace. Several participants aspired to find work as translators (Chinese to L1) or to find employment in large multinationals, assisted by their proficiency in Chinese.

Linguistic challenges of CFL acquisition

Participants identified the recognition and reproduction of Chinese characters and the mastery of tones as the most challenging components of CFL learning. The non-alphabetical writing system makes learning Chinese characters an enormous challenge for CFL learners, particularly for speakers of alphabetic systems. To a great extent, the struggle of English-speakers to acquire Chinese is due to the nature of its orthography (Scrimgeour, 2011). Specifically, its standard orthographic form does not readily indicate how Chinese characters are to be pronounced (Ye, 2011). On average, it takes L1 English speakers at least three times longer to learn Chinese than to learn French or Spanish. Chinese is ranked as the most difficult language for L1 English speakers to master (Stevens, 2006). Participants found competent usage of Chinese characters very difficult, particularly as far as writing was concerned. Phumi's comment illustrates this point: "Characters are the most difficult. The main thing is because we are in South Africa. In South Africa we do not see the Chinese characters."

Further, the Chinese language has four principal tones which determine the meaning of a word: the first tone is high; the second tone is rising; the third tone is falling and rising; and the fourth tone is falling (Zhang, 2009). Words are either single syllable, or formed bi-syllabic by combining two single-syllable words. Each syllable can have one of the four tones, and the tone or tones define the meaning of the syllable or word (Tsai, 2011). Correct tonal pronunciation is therefore essential, as is the ability to distinguish tones when listening. There are a vast number of characters in Mandarin that have the same consonant and vowel sounds, but differ in their tonal pronunciation. This is why tones are very important for both speaking and listening (Tsai, 2011). All participants lamented the difficulty of acquiring tones, as this comment demonstrates: "The most difficulty is the tones. It is definitely the tones. Listening to tones is the most difficult for me." In this regard participants were further hindered by the lack of opportunity to engage in and listen to conversations in Chinese.

Discussion

This paper has discussed the experiences of participants engaged in CFL study in South Africa. Studying CFL in South African institutions is defined as an external SL context (Siegel, 2007; Baker, 2001): students function in a "lonely" language environment where the dominant language (usually English) is used as the medium of instruction with limited code switching to Chinese in the classroom. Conversational practice is extremely limited, if it exists at all. Chinese classes compete with other academic offerings on the timetable; tutors are experts, not peers, and a tutor services a whole class and not an individual student. In addition, the opportunity to engage in social interaction with native speakers is missing. Accordingly, South African participants have to expend great energy in pursuit of their language interest and their perseverance is noteworthy. Furthermore, CFL as offered at South African universities falls into the category of a L1 monolingual programme (Baker, 2007). For at least the first year or two, English is used as the medium of instruction during the Chinese language class.

Participants' remarks showed that the affective nature of language learning impacted CFL acquisition, both positively and negatively as Dewaele (2011) confirms. The experience of learning Chinese was both exciting and intimidating; students were empowered as they discovered new skills and, at the same time, overwhelmed by embarrassment and shyness (Horwitz, 2010). All participants recognised the advantage of a disciplined and structured learning environment with regular assignments and testing, the so-called "push" exercised by lecturers (Lu and Zhao, 2011). Participants shared common rationales for the study of Chinese: the rising status of China and the Chinese language, employment prospects, and idiosyncratic fascination with China and its culture. Similarly, the challenges specific to learning the Chinese language – for instance the mastery of written characters and tones - were encountered by all participants, something that is confirmed in other studies (Cruikshank and Tung, 2011; Scrimgeour, 2011; Tsai, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper explored students' experience of learning CFL in South Africa within a particular socio-linguistic setting that illustrates the challenge of FL language learning. Problems were chiefly attributed to the language learning context and the type of programme, and less to the individual learner. The findings are particularly useful for the insight they provide into students' experience of CFL when these students are limited to the classroom contexts of their native institutions, without access to a broader learning environment. This creates a "lonely" language learning experience in which students feel isolated in spite of their intense interest in Chinese. These findings can also be applied to CFL learning in countries other than South Africa, and are useful in suggesting guidelines for the improvement of CFL tuition in other African countries. Strategies should be developed to create an "artificial" immersion environment; for example, students should be encouraged to use a computer generated resources to enhance their study of Chinese. The provision of a DVD or CD library is an inexpensive resource which can also promote the study of Chinese. Students could be given a resource list of Chinese residents who may be willing to engage with CFL students or who may, for a small fee, be willing to provide stay-at-home opportunities (whereby students engage in weekend or longer visits to Chinese families). Similarly, projects should be initiated through the Confucius Institutes to enable native Chinese students to visit South Africa for short-term camps, summer schools or at-home visits with local families. In short, there are many ways of creating helpful language environments and students and lecturers should seek innovative methods through which they can immerse themselves in the Chinese language.

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