

Accented Mandarin and Teaching Linguistic Diversity in the Chinese Second Language Classroom

ZHOU, Yan

Abstract

This study examines the concept of linguistic diversity in Chinese-speaking regions, discusses how various accents affect the acquisition of Chinese as a second language (CSL) with a focus on listening comprehension, and recommends that students be exposed to non-standard Mandarin accents in the CSL classroom. This study especially highlights CSL speakers' perspectives on this issue by conducting questionnaires and interviews, which are largely missing in existing research. In addition, three types of pedagogical strategies are proposed to promote exposure to accented Mandarin in the CSL classroom, including the cultivation of teachers' awareness, curricula design, and authentic teaching materials.

Keywords: linguistic diversity, CSL, listening skills, accented Mandarin

1 INTRODUCTION

As of 2017, Chinese has become the third most commonly taught foreign language overall in K-12 schools in the U.S., and the fifth most commonly taught in U.S. high schools (American Council, *National K-16 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey Report* in 2017); in 2018, 13,825 high school students in the U.S. took the Advanced Placement (AP) Chinese exam (The College Board, 2018). Despite the fast-growing popularity of Chinese in the U.S., many issues in the field of teaching and learning Chinese as a second language (CSL) are yet to be addressed. One of these concerns is how to address linguistic diversity in the CSL classroom amidst the sociopolitical background that calls for equity, inclusion, and diversity in higher education and other sectors of society.

Over the past few decades, the Mandarin-speaking population has grown dramatically as the result of language planning and the promotion of *Putonghua* ('common speech' in mainland China). In many dialect-speaking areas, Mandarin has become the lingua franca and the dominant language (Li, 2006). However, Mandarin in dialect-speaking areas tends to be flavored with dialect accents, vocabulary, and grammar (Chen, 1999). CSL speakers who have been taught only Mandarin only often find themselves lost in natural conversations with native speakers. In the U.S., the diversified group of Chinese immigrants has led to another challenge: Chinese heritage language learners who speak different varieties of Chinese at home are usually placed in the same class to learn standard Mandarin, which imposes extra pressure on their identity struggles (Wei & Hua, 2011). These issues, if not addressed appropriately, could lead to hot moments related to language attitude and even conflicts among students and instructors in CSL programs.

In the ESL field, exposure to different varieties of English has been widely discussed and acknowledged (Bejar et al., 2000; Major et al., 2005). Discussions also occur in the fields of other foreign language education. For example, Perez-Leroux and Glass (2000) specifically discuss linguistic diversity

and dialectal sensitivity in the Spanish foreign language classroom and offer a set of activities to help new instructors in recognizing and addressing linguistic biases in the classroom. Fox (2002) raises the issue that the superiority of Standard Metropolitan French (SMF) has limited students' exposure to other varieties and hinders students' development of listening skills. She that expose CSL learners to provide systematic exposure to non-SMF varieties of French in the French foreign language classroom so that students can be familiar with non-dominant French accents in real-life communication. In the CSL field, Yuanren Chao pioneered teaching linguistic diversity to students by presenting a variety of regional dialects along with Mandarin in the same lesson in *Mandarin Primer* (Chao, 2013/1949). In the 1980s, the two volumes of *Varieties of Spoken Standard Chinese* on dialect-accented Mandarin (Liang, DeFrancis, and Han 2019/1982; Kubler and Ho 2010/1984) were published as an effort to expose CSL learners to "dialect-flavored" standard Mandarin in natural speech (Kubler & Ho 2010/1984, Kubler 2019). Lu and Xie (2004) and Ding (2003) have advocated losing the standard of "standard Mandarin," or for including dialect-accented Mandarin in the CSL classroom. Some Chinese programs have developed curricula which that incorporate dialect-accented Mandarin (e.g. the listening comprehension course presented in Kubler (2019)). However, such practices are not common in U.S. post-secondary level Chinese programs, and linguistic diversity remains an under-discussed topic in the CSL field.

To highlight the benefits and the necessity of students to non-standard Mandarin and teaching linguistic diversity in the CSL classroom, the present study discusses three major aspects of this issue: the concept of linguistic diversity in Chinese-speaking regions (Section 2), the practical benefits for helping to improve CSL listening comprehension (Section 3), and CSL learners' experiences of and attitudes towards this issue (Section 4), which are often overlooked in previous discussions. Based on the findings in these sections, I propose several pedagogical adjustments to improve the current situation (Section 5). Section 6 provides concluding remarks.

2 LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

Exposure to non-standard Mandarin accents and authentic speech materials enables CSL students to have a more complete understanding of the language and culture that they are studying, especially its diversity aspect. Although *Putonghua* is often presented as the dominant language inside and outside of the country, China is a diverse nation both linguistically and culturally with the existence of hundreds of regional varieties of *fangyan*¹, which are often categorized into seven groups, including *Beifanghua* (northern Mandarin), *Wu*, *Yue* (Cantonese), *Xiang*, *Min*, *Kejia* (Hakka), and *Gan* (Li & Thompson, 1989). In this study, “standard Mandarin” refers to *Putonghua* in mainland China and *Guoyu* in Taiwan since both are taught in the CSL classroom in the U.S. Regardless of the political connotations of the two terms, standard Mandarin is generally based on the Beijing phonological system for its standard pronunciation and on modern literary works in *baihua* ‘the vernacular literary language’ for its grammatical norms (Chen, 1999). Non-standard Mandarin in this study refers to local varieties of *Putonghua* and *Guoyu* that are influenced by dialects or other languages and are spoken in Chinese communities across the world.

Although the Mandarin-speaking population has increased dramatically inside and outside of mainland China thanks to the *Putonghua* promotion campaign and the National Language Movement in Taiwan (Li, 2006), linguistic diversity is still common in everyday speech since Mandarin is often influenced by regional dialects (Lu & Xie, 2004). For example, the distinction between retroflex consonants *zh-*, *ch-*, *sh-* and dental consonants *z-*, *c-*, *s-*, as well as the nasal finals *-n* and *-ng* is difficult to acquire for many southerners. As a compromise, the *Putonghua* proficiency requirement for public school teachers has been adjusted in southern China; unlike teachers in northern China who are required to pass Level

¹ The translation of *fangyan* has been a controversial topic among linguists. Although “dialect” is the most common translation, some scholars has proposed other translations, such as “regionalet” by DeFrancis (1984) and “topolect” by Mair (1991). The current study uses “dialect” in a general manner, which refers to both regional dialects and social dialects.

1-B (92% correct) in the *Putonghua Shuiping Ceshi* ('*Putonghua* proficiency test'), southern teachers are only required to pass Level 2-A (87% correct) (Zhang, 2013). Even among northern Mandarin speakers, some sounds are pronounced differently from "standard" *Putonghua*. For example, retroflex initials tend to be lenited and pronounced as the approximant [ɻ] in Beijing Mandarin (described as "swallowing sound" in Zhang, 2005). Mandarin speakers living outside mainland China have accents influenced not only by the regional varieties of Chinese but also by English or other dominant languages in areas such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and the United States (Zhan & Tao, 2016). To acknowledge the differences among regional varieties while promoting the shared Chinese culture and identity, scholars have proposed the concept of *Da Huayu* "the Greater Chinese" (Lu, 2015; Li, 2017) as a lingua franca of the Chinese-speaking communities around the world. Lu (2017) underscores that the Greater Chinese is a spectrum in terms of its phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic features although it is based on *Putonghua* spoken in mainland China.

In addition to the regional varieties, linguistic diversity also includes social, gender-related, and generational varieties within speech communities (Pérez-Leroux & Glass, 2000; Suzanne, 1995), which are important parts of linguistic and cultural repertoires. Since the late 1980s when the Chinese started embracing western cultures after the reform and opening-up policies, Cantonese and Taiwanese accents and code-mixing of English words in *Putonghua* have spread among the younger generations to construct an elite identity with higher socioeconomic status and education level (Zhang, 2005). As China's economy has grown, thousands of migrant workers from different dialect backgrounds have moved to the coastal areas and have added various local flavors to the lingua franca *Putonghua* in major cities. The use of these local varieties in various cultural productions such as Chinese movies, comic sketches, and rap music fosters locality and diversity in the context of globalization (Liu, 2006, 2014). The recent development of *Caogen* ('grassroots') culture in cyberspace has brought more regional varieties

to the spotlight and challenged the language policies through the construction of online counter-hegemony discourse (Luqiu, 2018). Adopting the concepts of *linguistic capital*, which refers to the linguistic competence that a speaker can use to gain “profit” in a particular linguistic market that aligns with the social structure (Bourdieu, 1977), we can see that Chinese speakers utilize various varieties of the language as their *linguistic capital* to construct and reconstruct their sociocultural identities in different contexts. These non-standard Mandarin cultural products precisely capture the role of language in the construction of one’s identity distinct from others (Romaine, 2009), which has been a focus of discussions on linguistic diversity and culture.

The presence of different varieties of Chinese language and culture in the CSL classroom also contributes to the promotion of Mandarin in the U.S. from the point of view of linguistic diversity. Just like a person’s identities which are layered and span multiple categories, linguistic diversity also has multiple levels: Mandarin is the dominant language in mainland China, but it has been considered a less commonly taught language in the U.S. according to the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages (<https://ncolctl.org/>). Among Chinese-speaking communities in the U.S., there are a large number of speakers of other varieties of Chinese. According to the Census of Languages Spoken at Home conducted by American Community Service (ACS <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2013/demo/2009-2013-lang-tables.html>), the number of Mandarin speakers surpassed that of Cantonese speakers in the past ten years (between 2009-2013); in California, Cantonese speakers still outnumber than Mandarin speakers as of 2013 (although recent data is not yet available). On the micro-level, the approach of introducing non-standard Mandarin in the CSL classroom enables heritage learners who speak other varieties of Chinese at home to be more engaged in learning Mandarin and to better cope with the challenges (and even conflicts) of identity and language. On the macro-level, teaching linguistic and cultural diversity in China and other Chinese-speaking regions helps non-heritage CSL learners improve their linguistic

and sociocultural competencies as global citizens, reduce their stereotypes towards Chinese people and society, and increase their learning motivation, all of which helps promote Chinese as a less commonly taught foreign language in the U.S.

3 ACCENTS AND LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Being able to understand dialect-accented Mandarin is not only a goal for the education of linguistic and cultural diversity in the CSL classroom but is furthermore an essential component of advanced listening proficiency. SLA research has demonstrated that listening is an important skill in foreign language learning (e.g., Hamouda, 2013; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Goss, 1982) as it provides the means of comprehensible input, which is critical for successful communication (Rost, 2009; Jafari & Hashim, 2015). However, listening is also a difficult language skill to acquire (Arnold, 2000; Graham, 2006). Among the difficulties in second language listening comprehension, studies have found that unfamiliar accents and dialects are one of the significant obstacles to listening comprehension (Munro & Derwing, 1999; Buck, 2001; Graham, 2006) and can cause listening anxiety that negatively impacts listeners' performance (Graham, 2006, Elkhafafi, 2005; Derwing & Munro, 1997). In line with these research findings, the ability of to understand speech with a dialect accent is considered essential for advanced listening proficiency, as described in common standard listening proficiency scales. For example, in the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR), scale, speakers at Level 3+ (general professional proficiency, Plus) and above are expected to understand speech with different degrees of non-standard dialects (<https://www.govtilr.org/>). Similar guidelines are provided by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines (for Superior and Distinguished listeners, <https://www.actfl.org/>) and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) in the United States (secondary school standards level IV, V, and VI, <https://www.dodea.edu/>).

Given the linguistic diversity of the Chinese language and the existence of

varieties of non-standard Mandarin, it is especially challenging for CSL learners to understand native speakers from dialect-speaking areas if they have been exposed to standard Mandarin only. In the field of CSL, Chinese scholars in mainland China have divergent opinions regarding the inclusion of dialect knowledge in the classroom: Ding (2003) proposes introducing dialect knowledge to CSL learners to facilitate their communication with native speakers, which aligns with the idea of *Da Huayu*, “Greater Chinese” mentioned in Section 2; some scholars emphasize the dominant status of standard *Putonghua* in the CSL classroom (e.g., Qi & Jiang, 2008; Li & Guan, 2009). Although they disapprove of teaching dialect knowledge in the classroom, Li and Guan (2009) agree that exposing students to non-standard Mandarin to students is beneficial for their study in China (Li & Guan, 2009, p.77).

To raise awareness of the issue and to prepare students well for their real-life communication with native speakers, one effective way is to include non-standard Mandarin media materials in Chinese language proficiency listening tests. In the ESL field, the two most influential standard tests, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS), both include different varieties of English accents in the listening component. For example, one of the instructions of the IELTS listening test is: “A variety of voices is used in the IELTS Listening test, so you might hear Australian, British, New Zealand or North American accents” (British Council, takeielts.britishcouncil.org).

Although Mandarin is becoming a globally popular foreign language and has various regional accents, the current standard tests of Chinese proficiency, including *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* (HSK), ‘Chinese Proficiency Test’, carried out by *Hanban* (the Confucius Institute Headquarters) in mainland China, and the *Test of Chinese as a Foreign Language* (TOCFL) in Taiwan, have not included other varieties of Mandarin accents in the listening comprehension recordings. Instructions of the HSK test simply states: “Test takers who are able to pass the HSK (Level VI) can easily comprehend written and spoken information in Chinese and can effectively express themselves in Chinese, both orally and on paper.” (<http://>

www.chinesetest.cn/). Moreover, applicable assessment guidelines on listening proficiency as those provided by ILR and ACTFL scales are also not available in the CSL field. Research pertinent to these issues is urgently needed.

4 CSL LEARNERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD THE EXPOSURE TO DIFFERENT VARIETIES OF MANDARIN THE

Previous sections have introduced the benefits of exposing students to non-standard Mandarin: theoretically, this practice responds to the call for diversity and inclusion in classrooms, and improves students' linguistic and sociocultural literacy; practically, it is essential for advanced learners' listening proficiency. In this section, I present the results of a pilot study on CSL learners' attitudes towards being exposed to accented Mandarin in the classroom.

4.1 Instruments and participants

The study consists of two parts: an anonymous online questionnaire and a semi-structured follow-up interview. Twenty-four questions were asked in the questionnaire, all in English to avoid any possible misunderstanding, including eighteen multiple-choice questions and six short-answer questions. Questions were divided into three sections: 1) the participant's language background, 2) the participant's experience with and attitude towards dialect-accented Mandarin (through their instructors and other sources), and 3) the participant's attitude towards the two major varieties of Mandarin in the CSL classroom in the U.S.: *Putonghua* and Taiwanese Mandarin. Participants who indicated their willingness to participate in the follow-up interview were asked to clarify and elaborate on their answers to the short-answer questions on the questionnaire, focusing on their experience of and attitudes towards being exposed to different varieties of Chinese in the CSL classroom. The online questionnaire received fifteen responses in total; fourteen are considered valid with the required information and completed answers

to all questions. Six participants agreed to participate in the follow-up interview; among five were conducted face-to-face, and one over the phone. The interviews were conducted mainly in English, but participants were free to answer either in English or in Chinese. The interviews were video recorded with the participants' consent and were transcribed verbatim by the author for qualitative analysis. Responses in Chinese were translated into English by the author.

Among the participants, two are at beginner level, five are at intermediate level, and nine are advanced speakers. All participants fall in the age range between 20 to 35; eight participants are female, and six are male. In terms of educational background, one participant is pursuing a PhD degree, four are currently enrolled in college, and nine are professionals with a bachelor's degree. Table 1 shows more information about the participants' linguistic backgrounds and Chinese learning experiences. Except two Korean international students whose first language is Korean, all other participants are English native speakers who were born and raised in the U.S. In terms of ethnicity, five of the participants are Chinese Heritage Language learners, including two Cantonese and three Mandarin heritage speakers. There is also one Japanese American, one Vietnamese American, and one Hispanic-Latino American. In terms of language background, the five CHL learners, as well as their family members speak Chinese (three Mandarin and two Cantonese) but only two of the participants speak Chinese at home. Regarding CSL learning experience, only one participant did not learn Chinese in a classroom setting; the other thirteen participants have studied Chinese in different types of institutions, including weekend school (CHL learners), high school, and college. Seven of the participants have study-abroad experience in different cities in mainland China, including both northern and southern China. To understand their experiences with Chinese dialects or dialect-accented Mandarin, participants were also asked about their experiences living in Chinese-speaking regions. Among the fourteen participants, seven of them have lived in Chinese-speaking regions (mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore) stays ranging from two weeks to four

and a half years.

Table 1 Participants' backgrounds

First language	English	Korean	
	12	2	
Chinese Heritage background	Mandarin Heritage	Cantonese heritage	
5/14 (36%)	3	2	
CSL learning experience	One year or less	Three years or less	More than three years
14/14 (100%)	2	3	9
Experience living in Chinese-speaking regions	Less than one year	Two to three years	More than three years
7/14 (50%)	2	4	1

Although the sample size in the pilot study is small, the participants' diverse language and ethnic backgrounds, their learning experiences, as well as their experiences living in Chinese-speaking regions are representative of different groups of CSL learners in the U.S. college-level Chinese programs, including both international and non-international students, CHL and non-heritage learners, different ethnic groups of American students, who have Chinese in different types of institutions, as well as students with or without experience living in China.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 CSL learners' attitudes toward standard versus non-standard Mandarin accents of their instructors

For most CSL learners in the U.S., Chinese teachers are the native speakers with whom they frequently communicate. In responding to the question "do your instructors have an accent?" the two beginner participants answered "maybe," suggesting that they could not distinguish between different accents; three other

participants who also answered that “maybe” they could describe the main features of their instructors’ accents; one participant answered “no”; and the remaining eight participants answered “yes” and could describe whether their instructors spoke standard *Putonghua*, Taiwanese Mandarin, or had other local dialect accents. Accents mentioned by participants include: Shanghai accent, Nanjing accent, northern Mandarin such as Beijing (e.g., ‘er’ sound), and Shandong accents, as well as Taiwanese Mandarin (e.g., *fǎ* in *fǎguó*, is pronounced with the fourth tone). Participants were also asked if they liked their Chinese instructors’ accents. The responses show various types of language ideologies among CSL learners.

The first issue discussed in CSL learners’ responses is the definition of “native” and “standard” speech. Seven participants in the survey indicated they liked their instructors’ accents because they are clear and represent the native pronunciation of *Putonghua*, as Participant 2 writes:

(1) “Yes. because it was clear. They spoke like a native speaker would.”

(Participant 2)

The following two responses display two different types of criteria for standard *Putonghua* from CSL learners’ perspectives. Both Participants 6 and 8 can be considered advanced CSL speakers as they have at least four years of CSL learning experience and both have lived in China. Participant 6 refers to textbook recordings and official media as the standard pronunciation; Participant 7 has adopted phonological features such as 儿化 and the distinction between retroflex consonants and dental consonants as the criteria to identify standard *Putonghua*.

(2) “Yes. Their pronunciation aligns very well with recordings, news broadcasts, and other official media.” (Participant 6)

(3) “Some had stronger 儿化 vs some had more southern accents (and some TAs had specific Taiwanese lexical features, e.g., 法 =fa4). All could produce distinct *Zh/ch/sh* vs *z/c/s*, *n* vs *l*, etc., and they all used at least *some* 儿化, so I would say they were all “standard” by that measure.” (Participant 8)

These responses indicate that intermediate and advanced CSL learners in

the current study are not only able to distinguish different dialect accents but also tend to have sufficient knowledge of features of standard *Putonghua*. Since most of the intermediate and advanced level participants in this survey have lived in China or had Chinese instructors with dialect accents, this result indicates that some exposure to dialect accents helps CSL learners to become familiar with different accents, which will improve their communicative competence in real-life interaction.

Another noteworthy phenomenon is CSL learners' mixed attitudes towards their instructors' accents. Three participants (1, 3, and 9) in the study indicated that they preferred their instructors speaking standard *Putonghua* over *Putonghua* with a slight dialect accent; two of them had the experience of not understanding instructors due to their accents; one is mainly concerned about not being able to learn the correct pronunciation. See the following extracts of their responses.

(4) “I don't mind it especially **since I'm used to it now**, but sometimes **I would get confused** about what word she was saying since she uses *n-* instead of *l-* sometimes.” (Participant 3)

(5) “I like my instructors' pronunciation for the most part because they pronounce each of the words clearly enough that even if I don't know the meaning, I can think of the *Pinyin* and look up the word myself. Sometimes, it **might be difficult to listen or understand someone with a Southern/Taiwanese accent because they** don't really pronounce some sounds like the “H” in 是 and other words.” (Participant 9)

However, another three participants explicitly expressed their preference for instructors with different dialects. Participant 9, who is a Cantonese heritage learner, prefers a southern accent due to her heritage language background, which I will discuss in a later section.

(6) “**I like a variety of accents to help develop listening skills.**” (Participant 4)

(7) “Yes. Certain features of “standard” pronunciation have prestige in China, so if your speech has those features, it's helpful to get other people to

take you seriously. **I would have appreciated a little more exposure to the range of possibilities before I went the first time since most people don't have "standard" accents.**" (Participant 8)

The responses above indicate that CSL speakers are aware of the diverse variety of Mandarin accents in China and that "most people don't have 'standard' accents" (Participant 8). Participants 4 and 8 pointed out that more exposure to different varieties will benefit them in the development of listening skills and prepare them for communication with native speakers in China, which is consistent with research findings in the ESL field as discussed in Section 3.

4.2.2 CSL learners' attitudes towards learning about different varieties of Mandarin accents in the classroom

Survey results show that ten out of the fourteen participants (71.5%) had trouble understanding native speakers in real-life due to dialect accents, and 8 participants (57%) chose "yes" when asked if they want to learn about or to be exposed to various accents of Mandarin in the classroom. Three chose "maybe" and three chose "no". The following are examples of the participants' positive responses.

(8) "Standard *Putonghua*" is not the standard everywhere, so correcting everyone based on that standard would be like saying there is only one valid measurement of correctness, and that is Beijing. Yes, Beijing and Mainland China are big and important, but they are not the only parts of Greater China. **Respecting regional diversity and different pronunciation, syntax, and usage patterns allow us to learn from each other and value our differences.**" (Participant 4)

(9) "**Diversity is beautiful.**" (Participant 14)

Those who chose "no" or "maybe" with regard to being exposed to other accents are mainly concerned about the problem of understanding. For example, Participant 3 mentioned being confused by the instructor's Nanjing accent in class. Participant 3 welcomes more exposure to other accents, but she also emphasizes

“The teacher should try to teach in standard *Putonghua*, though, since that can be understood in any Chinese-speaking region”. In the follow-up interview, Participant 3 expresses her opinion more clearly. Participant 14 also expresses similar concerns although he had indicated the importance to be exposed to different accents in the questionnaire.

(10) 我觉得这只是一个 exposure 的问题, 跟别的方言 (地区的人) 有交流……但是我觉得对于一些刚刚开始的学生, 告诉他们这么多口音, 会让他们 confu- 让他们 confused……因为我觉得听力的话或者 - understanding 的话, 就是, 要有 exposure 嘛, 然后你在上课的时候你有这个基本嘛, 就是 basic Chinese, 然后, 到到以后 如果你听 别的口音, 那有一点不同, 但是你会听得懂一点点, 然后从那边开始, 那时候开始可以学得很多 . (Participant 14)

“I think this is just a problem of exposure, in terms of communicating with dialect-speaking native speakers of Chinese. However, I think for beginners, telling them so many varieties of accents will confuse them, because I think for listening or understanding, as long as you have basic knowledge learned in class, you will understand the non-standard accents bit by bit in the future, and you will gradually improve a lot.”

Results of the questionnaire and interview indicate that CSL speakers in the present study believe that more exposure to Mandarin with various accents other than the “standard” *Putonghua* can “help develop listening skills” (Participant 4) and to bring “awareness of cultural diversity” (Participant 5). However, instructors need to speak and teach as closely to the standard *Putonghua* as possible so that learners can learn the most common pronunciation and be understood by most native speakers. In terms of when and where to provide exposure to various accents and dialects, participants’ opinions vary. Participant 3 mentions that it is beneficial to provide supplementary cultural materials outside the language class to intermediate and advanced learners who have acquired the basic phonological features of Mandarin. Three participants explicitly pointed out that instructors should not confuse students in the beginners’ language class.

4.2.3 Standard *Putonghua* versus Taiwanese Mandarin

Standard *Putonghua* and Taiwanese Mandarin are the two main varieties that Chinese instructors in the United States speak. The two varieties have discrepancies not only in pronunciation but also in some lexical and syntactical patterns. For example, the pronunciation of the same lexical item 垃圾 is pronounced as *lājī* in *Putonghua*, but *lèsè* in Taiwanese Mandarin.

All participants are aware of the existence of discrepancies between the two varieties, which they indicated could sometimes be inconvenient but is not a big challenge for them. When asked which variety they prefer their instructors speak, seven participants (50%) chose “doesn’t matter,” four chose standard *Putonghua*, and three chose Taiwanese Mandarin. When asked whether there is a difference between a Taiwanese Mandarin-speaking instructor and a *Putonghua*-speaking instructor in terms of how well they felt they could learn Chinese, seven participants (50%) answered “no,” four answered “yes,” and three chose “maybe”. In addition, participants are asked if they want to be exposed to both varieties of Chinese in the classroom, seven participants (50%) chose “yes”, four chose “maybe”, and three chose “no”. These results lead to a similar conclusion as that of learners’ attitudes towards exposure to non-standard Mandarin accents in general: most learners appreciate the diversity and want to be exposed to different varieties; those who prefer learning *Putonghua* are mainly concerned with not being able to communicate with others if they learn to speak a less common accent; those who prefer Taiwanese Mandarin or other non-standard Mandarin are likely to be heritage learners.

(11) “I haven’t had an instructor who spoke Taiwanese Mandarin, but I wish I did. **It would be beneficial.**” (Participant 6)

Participants who prefer *Putonghua*-speaking instructors were less positive towards being exposed to both varieties. Participant 1 shared an opinion that aligns more with standard language ideology:

(12) I think that instructors speaking *Putonghua* are good. This is because a

student can learn the standard way first before branching out and familiarizing with other dialects and variations. **I think that many students when learning Chinese expect to be learning the Chinese spoken in the Mainland so Putonghua** language instructors may be better than the Taiwanese Mandarin-speaking instructors. However, I don't think the difference is too big of a deal." (Participant 1 in the questionnaire).

The mixed attitudes of CSL speakers remind us again of the diversity of students' backgrounds and the importance of adjusting pedagogical practices based on individual needs. On the one hand, for students who are aware of the linguistic diversity of Chinese and have experienced anxieties and difficulties understanding native speakers' accented Mandarin, exposure to non-standard Mandarin will greatly improve their listening proficiency and cultural literacy. On the other hand, it is crucial to emphasize that standard Mandarin pronunciation is undoubtedly the target language CSL learners should learn to speak and that the mimicry of non-standard Mandarin should not be actively encouraged.

4.2.4 Chinese Heritage speakers' attitudes

As revealed by previous studies, CHL learners are especially in need of being exposed to other varieties of Chinese in the CSL due to their heritage identity. According to the Census of Languages Spoken at Home (<https://www.census.gov/topics/population/language-use.html>) the population with Chinese dialect backgrounds has grown dramatically from 2000 to 2013. For example, the number of people who speak Cantonese at home has increased from 259,750 to 458,840, and the number of Hakka speakers has increased from 960 to 1365 (ACS, 2013 report). With bilingualism gaining popularity (King, 2009) in the U.S. and minority groups advocating for their heritage languages and cultures (Lee & Wright, 2014), the teaching and learning of Chinese heritage language (CHL) has become a popular topic in the field. Many U.S. college Chinese programs offer separate tracks for heritage and non-heritage learners, but CHL learners are a

group with a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Hendryx, 2008, cited from Ke & Li, pp. 2011: 218; Wong & Xiao, 2010). Wong and Xiao's (2010) study based on interviews with CHL students in the U. S. universities shows that dialect speaking heritage learners struggle to learn *Putonghua* while maintaining their heritage identity constructed by regional dialects such as Cantonese and Hokkien; many of the interviewed students learn *Putonghua* as a "language investment" to benefit their future career. Li and Zhu's (2011) study on language education in British Chinese communities finds that young generations in Chinese immigrant families that are mostly from dialect speaking coast areas identify themselves as multicultural individuals to resist the monolingual ideologies imposed by *Putonghua* and English, which are the dominant language in the local community and the nation respectively (Li & Zhu, 2011, p. 26).

The survey results in the present study are consistent with the conclusions drawn in previous studies: all five CHL speakers express their eagerness to learn about non-standard Mandarin varieties, including the Mandarin heritage speaker who has been taught by both *Putonghua*-speaking teachers and Taiwanese Mandarin-speaking teachers. Dialect-speaking heritage learners, especially, strive to maintain their mother tongue identity although they are placed in the same class as Mandarin heritage learners to learn *Putonghua*.

(13) **"I prefer Taiwanese Mandarin more because my family speaks with an accent similar to it,** but it could be harder for people to learn because of how the Taiwanese Mandarin/Southern Accent tends to leave out some syllables when pronouncing words." (Participant 9, Cantonese heritage)

Participant 9 is a Cantonese heritage who indicates speaking Cantonese with family. Although Cantonese is not close to Taiwanese Mandarin, Participant 9 thinks the northern Mandarin accent with the *er* sound "sounds weird and unnatural," and he aligns more with the Taiwanese Mandarin accent.

Although it is impossible to provide each heritage group learner with an individualized curriculum in most Chinese programs, it is helpful for Chinese

instructors to understand the diversity within CHL learners and their struggle of constructing heritage identities in the dominant standard *Putonghua*-speaking classroom and the English-speaking society.

4.3 Discussion

The pilot study shows that CSL speakers tend to have a positive attitude towards the exposure to a variety of Mandarin accents in the classroom, but their reasons vary: CHL speakers with a non-*Putonghua* speaking background have a strong preference for the presence of other varieties in the classroom; non-CHL speakers are eager to learn about linguistic and cultural diversity and believe that being exposed to different accents can prepare them for real-life communication with native speakers. Aligning with scholars and practitioners who are not supporting the inclusion of non-standard Mandarin in the CSL classroom, CSL learners, especially beginners have the same concern of not being able to learn accurate pronunciation at the beginner level if mistakenly learn the dialect accents. Beyond the practical concerns, the results of this study provide evidence that linguistic diversity is an important agenda for CSL speakers, which challenges the common monolingual ideology among many practitioners and researchers.

Another striking finding of the pilot study is that intermediate and advanced CSL speakers participating in this study are not only aware of the prestigious status of *Putonghua* but can distinguish standard *Putonghua* and dialect accents. Some of the participants are even able to name the prescriptive features of standard *Putonghua*. Although further studies are needed, this finding could provide evidence that students' Mandarin pronunciation, at the least at the intermediate and advanced levels, might not be negatively impacted by non-standard Mandarin accents in the CSL classroom since they can distinguish standard Mandarin pronunciation from other varieties, which could help eliminate the major concern of exposing non-standard Mandarin accents to students in the classroom.

5 PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

Discussions in the previous sections suggest that exposure to of non-standard Mandarin is beneficial not only for learners to learn about linguistic and cultural diversity in China and to improve their listening skills in real-life communication but also for the promotion of Chinese language and culture given the current socio-cultural background of diversity and inclusion. The results of the pilot study on CSL speakers' perspectives indicate that there is a need among both CHL and non-CHL learners to be exposed to non-standard Mandarin accents in the CSL classroom. This section proposes some possible strategies to improve the situation, which has not been extensively discussed in the field of CSL.

5.1 Improving teachers' awareness

As authorities in the CSL classroom, Chinese instructors play a central role in the agenda of exposing students to accented Mandarin to students. To reach a consensus and to improve teachers' awareness, open discussions and professional training sessions on this topic should be organized with the involvement of instructors, program directors, and CSL learners. Meanwhile, the various backgrounds of Chinese teachers and students in each institution can be turned into resources for all students to improve their listening skills and to learn about linguistic and cultural diversity in Chinese.

5.2 Curriculum design and lesson planning

Once instructors have developed an awareness of exposure to accented Mandarin in the CSL classroom, specific pedagogical strategies should be incorporated in the current curricula and lesson plans based on the individual program and teachers as well as students' backgrounds.

For Chinese programs that have resources and student's interests, two types of courses with different focuses can be developed based on students' needs: the first type being linguistics and culture content courses; the second type is language

courses focusing on listening comprehension. An example of the first type but with a wider scope is the popular General Education course offered by the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures at UCLA, Languages and Cultures of Asia (Asian 30), which examines the sound, grammar, vocabulary, and writing systems of various languages in Asia, as well as unique social cultures represented by these languages. This course not only benefits language learners but also other students on campus who are interested in linguistic and cultural diversities. The second type of courses is exemplified by the listening comprehension course for upper-intermediate and advanced learners at Williams College. Kubler (2019) describes how students in this course read about the sociocultural background of the dialects provided in the textbook first, then listen to the audio recordings of authentic conversations, and compare phonological, lexical, and grammatical differences between the local varieties of *Putonghua* and standard *Putonghua* through exercises such as discussion and translation. Such courses can also be offered as prerequisite training for study-abroad programs. In programs with limited resources and fewer students, Mandarin instructors can incorporate listening exercises with accented Mandarin materials into regular lesson plans. For example, instructors can add listening comprehension exercises as a regular assignment and design Task-Based Language Teaching activities (TBLT) (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001) for students to communicate with native speakers, such as making travel plans for a Chinese friend. In regions with large Chinese communities, instructors can also organize service learning that requires CSL learners to provide social services to individuals in the local communities (Morris, 2001), such as helping Chinese seniors who do not speak English to write letters in English.

In addition to the differences in individual programs, instructors should take students' and their backgrounds into consideration and address relevant linguistic issues. Instructors from mainland China who grew up in the *Putonghua* dominant society should pay attention to non-standard *Putonghua* varieties, such as Taiwanese Mandarin vocabulary or Cantonese tones, acknowledge the

discrepancies, and explain both standard and non-standard varieties if necessary. This is especially important when there are heritage students in the classroom who might prefer the non-standard varieties. Similarly, instructors can be more flexible when dialect-speaking heritage students prefer their mother tongue accents or are not able to pronounce standard sounds. Instructors from Taiwan and southern dialect-speaking areas can promote linguistic diversity by explicitly explaining non-standard varieties if students are interested.

5.3 Utilizing authentic teaching materials with accented Mandarin

While previous literature advocates using authentic materials to teach spoken grammar and improve students' general interactional competence (Brown & Lee, 1994; Tao, 2005; Tao et al., 2018), the present study emphasizes the representation of diverse local accents (and some lexical and syntactic differences) in authentic teaching materials, which is exemplified by several CSL teaching materials. For example, *Tell it Like it Is!* (Wang, 2005) utilizes multiparty and interactive conversations on the Chinese TV show *Shihua shishuo* to help learners develop listening and speaking skills, including understanding non-standard accents (Tao, 2005). *The Routledge Advanced Chinese Multimedia Course: Crossing Cultural Boundaries* (Lee et al., 2009) categorizes listening materials into a “normal accent”, “subtle accent”, and “mixed accent” so that students can be exposed to the authentic speech of native speakers. *Working with Spoken Chinese* (Tao, 2011) is developed from a spoken Chinese corpus of more than 60 hours of natural conversation between native speakers of diverse backgrounds.

While more authentic teaching materials are yet to be developed, instructors can develop complementary teaching materials from online videos on social media, such as street interviews of local residents or politicians' speeches. Just as with other activities, students should complete pre-task assignments, such as watching the videos, reading the subtitles, and answering pre-task questions; during the class, the instructor and students can watch videos again, share their answers to the

pre-task assignments, and discuss prominent differences in phonology, lexicon, and syntax; after the class, students can do a small project introducing the linguistic features and sociocultural backgrounds of the dialects. Such complementary authentic materials and exercises will benefit students in improving their listening skills and enrich their understanding of Chinese cultures in different areas.

6 CONCLUSION

Through the investigations of issues including linguistic diversity in Chinese-speaking regions, the obstacle of accents in CSL listening comprehension, as well as CSL learners' experiences of and attitudes towards being exposed to non-standard Mandarin accents, the present study highlights the benefits and the necessity of exposing students to non-standard Mandarin to students in the CSL classroom. Based on these findings, I propose to improve CSL teachers' awareness of multilingual ideology through various activities and to incorporate linguistic diversity education in both Chinese language and content course curricula. Utilizing authentic materials that contain non-standard Mandarin accents is also underscored as a crucial pedagogical strategy. Exposing CSL learners to non-standard Mandarin with dialect accents in the CSL classroom is not only a pedagogical change that challenges traditional CSL teaching philosophies, but further more a long-term endeavor to promote linguistic and cultural diversity in the field of CSL. To further the discussion on this topic, I plan to 1) expand my survey of students' attitudes toward non-standard Mandarin in the classroom to a larger scale and analyze my data using statistical tools; 2) conduct a large-scale survey about Chinese teachers' attitudes toward and self-evaluation regarding linguistic and cultural diversity in CSL classrooms; and 3) conduct an experimental study with a control group to find out whether the exposure to non-standard Mandarin helps improve learners' Mandarin listening and speaking proficiency.

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APPENDIX A

A questionnaire on Chinese second language (CSL) learners' attitudes towards learning about non-standard Mandarin with dialect accents

I. Language background

1. Do your parents or family members speak Chinese? *Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

2. If yes, do they speak *Putonghua* or other dialects? *Mark only one oval.*

Putonghua

Taiwanese Mandarin

Cantonese

Hokkien dialect

Other dialects

3. Do you speak Chinese at home? *Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

4. If not, what language(s) do you speak at home?

5. Have you lived in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Singapore? *Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

6. How long did you live in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Singapore?

7. Have you ever learned Chinese language before? *Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

8. If yes, please indicate where you learned Chinese (Elementary school, Junior high, High school, College, Weekend school, Self-study, study-abroad, etc.) and the length of your study.

II. Your previous or current Chinese instructor(s)

9. Are they native speakers? *Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

I had both native and non-native speaking instructors.

10. Do your instructors have an accent? *Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

Maybe

11. Describe what kind of accents they have (e.g. standard *Putonghua*, Taiwanese Mandarin, Cantonese accent, or other dialectic accents, foreign accents, weak/strong accent)

12. Do you like your instructor(s)' pronunciation of Chinese? Indicate why.

13. As a Chinese learner, how would you rate your pronunciation/accent?

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

My pronunciation is bad My pronunciation is perfect.

14. As a Chinese learner, how much do you aim to sound like a native speaker? *Mark only one oval.*

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all A lot

15. If you have an accent, are you confident speaking Chinese with your foreign/dialectical

accent? *Mark only one oval.*

1 2 3 4 5

No. I feel embarrassed Yes. It's fine as long as people

can understand me

16. Do you think everyone in your class should try to learn standard *Putonghua*?

- Mark only one oval.*
- Yes
- Maybe
- No

17. Have you had trouble understanding native speakers due to their dialectical accents?

- Mark only one oval.*
- Yes
- No

18. Do you want to learn about, or to be exposed to various accents of Chinese in the classroom? *Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

19. Please share your experience and thoughts of speaking Chinese with an accent (e.g. anecdotes or comments).

III. Learning from a *Putonghua* speaker or Taiwanese Mandarin speaker

20. What kind of Chinese do you prefer your instructor to speak? *Mark only one oval.*

- Standard *Putonghua*
- Taiwanese Mandarin
- Putonghua* with a weak dialectic accent
- Doesn't matter

21. In terms of how well you can learn Chinese, is there a difference between a Taiwanese Mandarin speaking instructor and a *Putonghua*-speaking

instructor? *Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

Maybe

22. Do you want to be exposed to both varieties of Chinese in class? *mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

Maybe

23. Do you think the discrepancies between *Putonghua* and Taiwanese Mandarin are inconvenient for learners? *Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

Maybe

24. Please share your experience with instructors speaking *Putonghua* or/and Taiwanese Mandarin and your thoughts regarding this issue (e.g., advantages and disadvantages of the different types of instructors)

Interview and conversation

If you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview with the researcher and a discussion with a peer student, please let me know your email address and indicate your preferred time. I will contact you and schedule the recording at your convenience.

25. Your email address: _____

26. What time of day works best for you for the interview and discussion? (e.g., week 11)

APPENDIX B

1. Do you like your previous Chinese teacher(s)' Chinese pronunciation? Why?

2. What kind of accents do your Chinese teachers have (e.g., standard *Putonghua*, Taiwanese Mandarin, Cantonese accent, or other dialectic accents)?

3. Could you share your experience with a non-standard Mandarin accent inside or outside the classroom?

4. Do you want to be exposed to non-standard Mandarin accents in the classroom? Why?

5. Could you share your experience of learning Chinese from *Putonghua* speaking teachers or/and Taiwanese Mandarin speaking teachers? Which variety do you prefer? As a learner, what are the advantages and disadvantages of learning the two varieties?

6. Do you want to be exposed to both *Putonghua* and Taiwanese Mandarin accents in the classroom? Why?

地方口音及中文二语言课堂中的语言多样性教育

周燕

摘要

本文从语言多样性这一概念出发，讨论地方口音对中文作为第二语言听力理解的影响以及在中文课堂适当提供不同口音输入的必要性。问卷调查及访谈结果表明，在中文课堂中呈现不同口音受到学习者的支持，尤其符合华裔学生在身份认同方面的需求。最后，本文从提高中文教师的语言多样性意识、利用真实语料呈现不同口音，以及课程设计等方面提出了教学建议。

关键词：语言多样性 中文作为第二语言教学 听力技能 地方口音

周燕，美国加利福尼亚大学。