

Chinese Language Education in Victorian Government Primary and Secondary Schools Post-Pandemic

Yong Chen^{1,*}, Xiaoxia Wang²

Teacher Centre, Qu Jing Normal University, Yunnan, China.

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Corresponding author: Yong Chen, Teacher Centre, Qu Jing Normal University, Yunnan, China.

Abstract

As one of the world's oldest languages, Chinese has had different teaching and learning modes governed by technological or economic factors of different eras. The COVID-19 pandemic brought profound changes to society. While the worst impact may be over, its effects have already reshaped methods of Chinese teaching and learning at Australian primary and secondary schools. Victoria is one of well-developed offerings of Chinese language education in Australia. During the pandemic, nearly all the area's local schools applied a blended learning mode to language teaching. As we enter the post-pandemic era, Chinese language learners and educators in Victoria's schools face many challenges. To embrace and address these challenges, the following questions are worth exploring: Why did the COVID-19 pandemic adversely affect Chinese teaching in local schools and alter the future of Chinese language education in Victoria? How did Chinese language learners in Victoria's primary and secondary schools perceive their experiences from blended learning? This paper will focus on Chinese language education in Victorian primary and secondary schools in the post-pandemic period with the intent of deepening the understanding of the above issues.

Keywords

Victoria, Government Primary and Secondary Schools, Chinese Language

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought long-term ramifications to many aspects of society. It has altered the methods of teaching the Chinese language in Victorian primary and secondary schools, which are now undergoing changes and reforms in terms of enhancing learning experiences and objectives and selecting the best modalities for the future. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full solution to the current issues, but the authors aim to provide some insights on how to move forward.

1. The economic and demographic backgrounds

The status of a language outside its native country is usually influenced by local political and economic considerations, social and cultural traditions, and population demographics (Chen, 2013). The latest trade figures show that Australia-China trade in goods was \$265.88 billion AUD in 2021, up by 14.9% from the previous year. Australia's trade surplus with China was \$83.4 billion AUD, accounting for 64% of Australia's overall trade surplus (\$129.44 AUD) in that year (Ministry of Commerce, 2022). In addition, figures from the Australian Bureau of National Statistics indicate that the Chinese population in Australia exceeded 1.4 million people in 2021. Mandarin is still the most spoken language other than English in Australia. In Victoria, 221,800 people spoke Mandarin at home. Box Hill, Victoria's Chinese community, has the highest proportion of Mandarin speakers in Australia at 33.9% (Jason, 2022). The large Chi-

nese-speaking population and the general emphasis on Chinese learning by parents of Chinese backgrounds are essential internal factors in the related development of Chinese language education in primary and secondary schools in Victoria.

2. Overview of Chinese language programs of local schools

Area institutions that offer language programs include government primary and secondary schools, Victorian Language Schools (VSL), and Community Language Schools (CLS). In 2020, 1,282 government primary and secondary schools in Victoria offered 74 languages other than English (LOTE) to students, with 442,928 primary and secondary school students enrolled in these courses. In addition, VSL and CLS institutions offered 53 and 47 non-English language courses, respectively, with a total of 57,808 students enrolled. According to 2020 statistics, the most significant number of schools offering Chinese language courses in government primary schools was in Victoria, with 209 schools accounting for 19% of the total. The eight most studied language enrollments at the primary level in 2020 were Chinese Mandarin (accounting for 22%), Italian (18.6%), Japanese (17.2%), Indonesian (13.9%), French (8.9%), Auslan (8.8%), Spanish (5.7%), and German (2.4%) (Department of Education and Training, 2021).

3. Problems of Chinese language education in local schools

3.1 Negative impact on the political and economic environment

Tensions between China and Australia have extended to their respective educational fields. In 2019, Australia discontinued its local Confucius classes in 13 public primary and secondary schools (Jordan, B., & Laura, C, 2019). While the Victorian government continues to promote Chinese as a future language, providing Chinese language classes in schools has been controversial, especially during complex diplomatic relations between the two countries (Weinman et al., 2020). Even though some communications have not been affected by the political relationship between the two countries, the spread of the global pandemic has enhanced these difficulties. These circumstances are detrimental to teaching Chinese in Australian primary and secondary schools. The barriers created between China and Australia will further affect the availability of local Chinese language education resources and attitudes toward Chinese people in the future.

3.2 Chinese cultural products lack influence

Compared with Japanese cartoons and Korean K-pop culture, Chinese cultural products are not attractive to young Australian students (Liu, 2022). Due to the Japanese economy, technological power, and western-style political values, Japanese was Australia's most studied non-English language (Sturak, K. & Naughten, Z., 2010). For example, Japanese ninja-themed cultural products have been featured in Australian youth films, television, and online programs, and ninja-themed picture books have been added to the library of extracurricular learning materials in Australian primary and secondary schools. Contemporary Chinese culture is complex in its composition, and some of its values are very "Chinese." Most traditional Chinese culture taught in Australian primary and secondary schools is Chinese calligraphy, martial arts, painting, paper-cutting, folk music, and food. However, there has been no innovation in traditional Chinese cultural products for decades.

3.3 Number of Chinese learners declines

While the number of students learning Chinese in primary school is large, that number shrinks significantly as students went to secondary education. In 2020, approximately 15,000 secondary school students were registered students of the Chinese language; 13,683 attended Victorian secondary day schools, and 1,374 were enrolled in Chinese VCE (Department of Education and Training, 2021). The distribution of Chinese language learners by the level of difficulty in Australian primary and secondary schools is pyramidal, with just a small number of students able to progress beyond the beginner levels taught in primary school and an even smaller number able to continue without the benefit of a Chinese background. For a long time, Australian learners without pre-existing ties to Chinese culture have faced greater struggles compared with students of European languages that are cognate with English. This has led to Chinese teachers teaching Chinese students the Chinese language in Australia.

3.4 The negative impact of the capital market

As China's Double Reduction policy regulations became stricter, online training companies inevitably went overseas to develop (Wang, 2021). These institutions mainly targeted expatriated Chinese youths between the ages of four and 15. The online courses started with Chinese language and mathematics and later expanded to other subjects. Due to a lack

of regulations and guidance, some of these training companies in Australia followed the money-burning model of the capital market, besieging students and parents with online advertising, deviating from the laws of Chinese education, and ignoring the reality of overseas Chinese learning communities. Some rapidly launched online Chinese education products lacked interactivity, transposed offline classes, or overly pursued the entertainment aspect of online products.

4. Reflections and recommendations

4.1 Seek common ground while reserving differences

China will continue cooperating with Australian language education institutions, professional organisations, and educators to provide quality Chinese language learning resources and services for all kinds of Chinese language education institutions, teachers, and learners (Center for Language Education and Cooperation, 2020). To promote the development of Chinese language education in Australia, China should look more at the commonality of Chinese and foreign values and consider the environmental changes brought about by the pandemic in Australia itself, working together to minimize the impact of political relations on language learning. China should also draw on the strengths of local researchers and conduct targeted local research to understand who is learning and what methodologies are being used.

4.2 Optimisation of Chinese blended teaching

The blended teaching mode post-pandemic is likely to become the normal mode in Chinese language education, which is an inevitable trend of historical development (Zhang, 2020). Students will live and interact virtually online, and much of their learning will occur there as well (Harper & Lo Bianco, 2021). Under the blended learning post-pandemic framework, Chinese educators must highlight immediacy and interactivity, build new classes in online communities, develop Chinese learning products that apply to students from different cultural backgrounds, and utilize formats that interest local students to share cultures and stories that they are interested in and can understand. For social platforms, the way forward must be based on young learners' affinity and the normalization of information technology. It requires innovative approaches that allow students to be more directly vocal and present in their language learning.

4.3 Strengthen the training of Chinese language teachers

Chinese language teachers must constantly update their cognitive structure and knowledge framework and actively engage in online theoretical research and practical exploration of overseas Chinese language education. During teacher training, more attention must be paid to academic research on Chinese language teaching in the post-pandemic environment, embedding educational psychology and sociology into specific Chinese language pedagogies. Teachers should improve their Chinese teaching skills and cross-cultural communication abilities, master their teaching design methods, and improve their assessment and feedback to students of different ages and Chinese language levels. In addition, teachers' abilities to access online resources and sieve through them for quality assurance should be strengthened to enhance Chinese language teachers' digital capacity, making information literacy a necessary quality for Chinese language teachers (Zhang, 2020).

4.4 Adhere to student-centered Chinese language teaching

The most urgent task for Chinese language teaching in Australia's primary and secondary schools is to attract more students without Chinese backgrounds while providing better language teaching for ethnically Chinese students who already have a good foundation (Chen, 2013). Attracting young Australians that may be willing to learn Chinese will generate deserved rewards and improvements during the process of learning Chinese. This common goal between the Chinese and Australian governments is fundamental to changing the pyramid of Chinese language learners in Australian primary and secondary schools. The impact of the pandemic on overseas Chinese language education is two-sided. We should see the pandemic as an opportunity in the process of development, grasp the general trend of human social interaction in the post-pandemic and information age, and try to build a new situation for overseas Chinese language education.

5. Conclusion

In the early pandemic, schools mainly aimed to avoid spreading the COVID-19 virus on campus. At that time, large-scale online teaching was an emergency approach, and the first task was to be able to teach and learn. Many people thought online teaching was only temporary, but few thought about the next step of the online approach. After the pandemic, blended teaching has become more critical for current Chinese language education in Victorian Government primary and secondary schools. More and more teachers realise that blended teaching is not a plan B in a crisis,

but a standard for current and future education and the new ecology of Chinese language education in Australia.

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