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How to Make Effective Use of Sister School Relationships to Promote Chinese Teaching and Learning in NSW schools

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**Rationale**

The National Statement on Asia Literacy in Australian Schools 2011–2012 makes it clear that both Asian languages and cross curriculum studies of Asia are critical to building an Asia literate Australia. There are 103 DoE (Department of Education) government schools at NSW that have established a sister school relationship with China, Japan, Korea and Indonesia; among those, 38 have a sister school in China (from Sister School Relationships: NSW Departmental Schools and Asia 2012 data). Up to February 2015, the NSW Department of Education Confucius Institute had established 13 Confucius classrooms in NSW public schools, each of which is coupled with a sister school in China. This indicates that an increasing number of NSW governmental schools have realised a sister school relationship will help improve Australian young people’s proficiency in languages other than English; broaden their understanding, acceptance and tolerance of other cultures and become Asia literate, and enrich NSW curriculum development.

Denise Lussier (2000) points out that it has become essential to integrate intercultural communicative competence to language competence with coherence, so it is important to view language teaching and learning as integrally linked to developing (inter)cultural representations and our vision of the world. In 2006 Yongsheng Gao discussed various problems in learning English based on three hundred questionaries from college students. These included lack of knowledge of intercultural communication and lack of competence and confidence while communicating with foreigners. He argued that those issues prevent language learners from sustainable development in their language skills. To overcome these problems, he suggested that communications in the real cultural context with authentic language exchanges is required. Therefore, a positive sister school relationship will set up the real language environment in which students can practice and enhance their intercultural communicative competence.

As Jane Orton (2008) recommended , we need to create ‘… ways to provide frequent sustained opportunities to hear the language used naturally and inviting opportunities to use it productively need to be created.’ Therefore, learning Chinese from native speakers of a similar age is highly effective and natural. Students are learning authentic and the most recent expressions. To make this happen and enhance Chinese learners’ language skills and intercultural communicative competence, we need to make effective and full use of sister school relationships.

Findings from School Visits

Through my investigations, observations, discussions and research at a number of Chinese schools, I have found and learned many things that I would like to share with the teachers of Chinese. Those schools include:

* + Xi’an University of Arts and Science
  + Shaanxi Normal University
  + Xi’an Gaoxin No.1 High School
  + Xi’an Tie Yi High School
  + Xi’an Jiaotong University
  + Nanjing University
  + The Middle School attached to Nanjing Xiaozhuang University
  + Nanjing No. 5 Junior High School (Originally Nanjing No. 24 High School)
  + Xuzhou No. 1 High School
  + Ningbo Foreign Affairs School
  + National Taiwan Normal University
  + National Chengchi University
  + National Taiwan Ocean University
  + Guangzhou Jinan University

My findings at those schools that will undoubtedly benefit NSW schools fall into two categories: exchange programs and connected classrooms.

*Exchange programs*

Out of seven schools I visited, three send students to visit their sister schools in the United States every year and vice versa. They are in very strong relationship and have a lot of interactions throughout the year. Each visit lasts three or four weeks. When American students stay with Chinese families they are required to note down five expressions a day in a diary; teachers check the diaries every day and discuss them with the students. After the trip, students in the two countries keep in contact via WeChat at least once a week and via fortnightly emails. Teachers in both schools track their students’ log books.

A school at Ningbo has been doing peer proofreading and peer marking with their sister school when the Chinese Bridge competition is coming up in Australia and English speeches are going to be made in China. The students help each other before their teachers mark the speeches. Students learn from their peers and find it fun to learn through Skype, QQ or WeChat. In addition, it reduces teachers’ workload somewhat.

Two schools in Xi’an do a number of joint project based learning projects with their sister schools via Edmodo. Year 8 students share digital stories using iPad applications to talk about My School Uniforms, My Hometown, My Favourite Sports and Festivals. Students are required to provide subtitles or transcripts of their stories if they cannot speak the target language well. They are also required to mark their partners’ work with comments. Teachers in China and the United States will choose the most reasonable marks and comments and praise the student with emoji under his/her post or with digital stickers. If the video is too big to upload onto Edmodo, students need to upload their work onto Youku or Tudou, the Chinese version of YouTube. As the registration procedures are all shown in Chinese, it is a project based learning exercise for American students. Apart from individual work, they also do pair work when it comes to the Chinese New Year and Christmas. Students in two schools are paired up and work together on one project.

The three schools in Xi’an and one school in Ningbo don’t restrict their exchange programs just to language. Two invited their sister schools to participate in high school volleyball and soccer tournaments in Shaanxi. One invited their sister school to come for the High School Musical Festival in Ningbo. One Chinese school was represented in the US Science Education Exposition and Competition.

Exchange programs are not only for students, but also for teachers. Using her school holidays, an American teacher of Chinese goes to her sister school in Xi’an on her own every year to teach English while learning Chinese. She said she could even use her unpaid leave if she wanted to stay longer. Even for a native speaker of Chinese like me, I still think it necessary to go back to China to update my vocabulary frequently as I have been teaching a Chinese Background Speakers course.

Some teachers are very active in communicating with their counterparts in China via emails, Skype and WeChat, discussing applying technology to teaching and recommending free online courses on http://www.xuetangx.com/ and www.chinesemooc.org, the two largest Massive Open Online Course and Small Private Online Course websites in China. They even tried Bridgit Conferences when discussing students’ joint projects.

*Connected classrooms*

Two schools have video conferencing lessons with their sister schools in the United States every month. One lesson lasts 40 minutes and is conducted in Chinese and English in turns. To make every minute count, they use a flipped classroom model to conduct teaching and learning. The Chinese teacher in the United States assigns a topic to students with or without a related video made by the teacher one week in advance. Students bring their research and questions to class. The sister school in China will answer the questions and even do the role play to perform the topic. The teacher in the United States will then summarise the key words and sentences before having students repeat after their partners in China. If time permits, students will pair up from each school to do the role play and choose the best performance. For the next lesson, the same topic will be undertaken in English. Throughout a year, they will cover five topics in project based learning: Dining Out in China/the United States, Shopping in a Supermarket in China/the United States, A School Day in China/the United States, School Sports and Going to China/the United States with My Family. On some special occasions, like Chinese New Year, students in two schools may do handicrafts together or teach each other. The American teacher of Chinese buys lots of resources and materials, such as blank fans and Peking opera masks together with the teacher in China every time when she goes to China so that students can use the same materials in the video conference.

One school uses QQ as the communication media. The advantage of the QQ platform is that it is free, but it is better designed for one-on-one communication than for group-on-group. The other school connects their sister school via Adobe Connect, which is stable in the quality of image and voice transmission but very expensive.

Findings from University Visits

The most impressive thing I learned in Xi’an University of Arts and Science is the Leap-over model in teaching Chinese when I observed Ms You’s lecture in which she introduced this model to her student teacher. Instead of spending much time in memorising the strokes of Chinese characters and writing them, learners focus on recognising them and typing them on computers. This model greatly reduces learners’ fear of writing Chinese characters and enhances their confidence in communicating in Chinese. Ms You, senior lecturer in the School of Chinese Studies, told me the leap-over model was initiated in Beijing Normal University and has seen a greater success in Singapore. I am positive that it will be successful in Australia as long as we produce appropriate reading and writing activities online.

In Xi’an Jiaotong University and Shaanxi Normal University an increasing number of lecturers and professors are using Rain Classroom. Instead of asking students to put away their cell phones in a lecture, a teacher in Rain Classroom urges them to use their phones to connect to his PowerPoint presentation by scanning a WeChat code or inputting a group code. There are a lot of interactions in the classroom. Teachers get students’ responses quickly and then give them timely feedback. This could give school teachers in NSW more choice in organising class activities, but it is better applied to senior students as everyone needs a cell phone with available data. Some junior students do not have a phone yet or have limited data access. I am going to start Rain Classroom in my Year 12 Chinese Background Speakers class, as all the students have the WeChat app already installed on their cell phones.

There are thousands of textbooks on teaching Chinese as a second language on the global market, but very few on teaching heritage Chinese learners or home users. Mr Wang, professor of Guangzhou Jinan University, has been focusing on this field for years and is designing a testing system for heritage learners with his team, which he is going to bring to Australia very soon. Dr Fang just accomplished her thesis of Heritage Chinese Learning and Acceptance in Australian High School. They both think there will be a considerable increase in the number of people learning Chinese outside China in coming years due to the expanding Chinese population outside of China. Heritage Chinese teaching and learning has not been considered importace in mainstream schools in western countries for many reasons. Professor Wang said it was time to change this and he is interested in writing textbooks for heritage learners in cooperation with NSW front-line teachers. I expect to see the fruit soon.

Professor Wang is also an expert in quantitative analysis in teaching Chinese characters. I agree with him that we teachers should not put too much emphasis on the correct order of strokes while teaching Chinese characters. Learners find this so tedious and time-consuming that they can lose their motivation to learn further. To make a lesson interesting, a many Chinese teachers explain the origin of a Chinese character and even make a story of it with an effort to associate every Chinese character with an image. However, Professor Wang thinks teachers should spend more time teaching students how to use a Chinese character in a certain context rather than the shape or the story behind it. I think these two points are very relevant to NSW Chinese teaching, given the fact that stage 4 students only have 100 mandatory hours learning a language and stage 5 only five hours fortnightly.

In a discussion about intercultural communicative competence, Professor Zhang, Director of the Languages Department at the National Taiwan Chengchi University, points out that in the global village nowadays language students should do more than just enhance their awareness of and show respect to other cultures while learning a language. They need to practice and improve intercultural communicative competence together with language competence. Excelling in language competence does not mean being highly culturally competent. It is important that we integrate cultural representations and our vision of the world into language teaching and learning, which is meaningful in a multicultural society like Australia.

Dr Huang, at National Taiwan Ocean University, distinguished cross-cultural communication from intercultural communication and stressed that the latter is more relevant in school and university context. She thinks we should cultivate students’ intercultural communicative competence rather than intercultural competence because intercultural communicative competence involves linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence. In her research, she applies some theories, such as Intergroup Contact Theory, Transformative Learning Theory, Task-Based Learning Teaching and Culturally Responsive Teaching, to intercultural communicative competence teaching and learning. I think we can find the applications and practice of these theories and teaching strategies in the exchange programs and sister school relationship mentioned above.

Not only can we establish partnership with a school, but also we can do it with a university**.** Ms Liu, vice dean of the International School of Chinese Studies in Shaanxi Normal University; Dr Huang, at the National Taiwan Ocean University, and Ms Sun, senior lecturer, at the National Taiwan Normal University all introduced their summer/winter school programs which they have been running for overseas learners of Chinese including high school students. They have students from Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand and the United States. In their program students go to language and cultural classes every day, stay in college students’ dormitories and go to college canteens for meals, which is another new but exciting experience for school students. The length of the program for high school students is customised and can be as short as three days and as long as a month. It is a good supplement to the school partnership and students can experience different educational facets of China or it can be a starting point for a school that has not established a sister school relationship in China.

Obstacles in the Sister School Relationship

All the schools I visited have sister schools overseas, three in the United States and four in Australia are all happy to have a sister school relationship, but half of them are not as active in maintaining those relationships as expected. After investigation, I found there were four reasons at the China end and three reasons at the Australia end.

Chinese Year 9 students need to sit an entrance exam for senior high schools. The pressure starts in Year 8. Therefore, the students’ priority is to work hard for the exam, which leaves little time for keeping in contact with their partners in sister schools. Due to the censorship in China, Skype is not permitted in schools. Using different brands of interactive white boards in Australia and China makes it impossible to have a connected classroom. The two major Australian brands, SMART and Promethean, in are not commonly seen in China. Some school leaders in China don’t trust live communications with overseas schools in case of politically sensitive issues being discussed through video conferencing. Change of executive members in charge of exchange programs may affect the development of sister school relationship. The successor may have a different view of partnership or may not get details of the partnership in the process of duty transition. One school in Nanjing I visited has not started any programs or cooperation with its sister school in NSW that was assigned two years ago by the Confucius Institute in NSW and the Jiangsu Provincial Department of Education, China. The reason is that the new principal did not get much information regarding the partnership and could hardly find the contact details of their sister school in NSW.

When it comes to the schools in NSW, our students often feel embarrassed and even frustrated when communicating with their partners in China because of the gap in language proficiency. They realise that the Chinese students’ English is superior to Australian their Chinese. As a result, they tend to talk with their counterparts in English rather than in Chinese.

The second reason why some schools at NSW are not so enthusiastic about exchange programs is that teachers find it hard to keep in frequent contact with their sister school after a long day’s work. At government schools in NSW, a teacher needs to organise everything by himself, including overseas excursion applications, comparing travel agents’ quotes about airfares and accommodation, applying for visas for students, and having an information night for parents and students who are interested in overseas trip. There is no fund for relief. He has to use his limited spare time to do this. By comparison, teachers in China do not need to deal with any paperwork, which is all left to administrative staff at school. A full time school teacher in China has 480 minutes teaching time as compared to NSW teachers’ 1200 minutes. Our teachers must sacrifice a lot of his time for exchange programs. Furthermore, the overseas excursion application in NSW takes longer time and includes more procedures. As a result, some teachers choose not to organise overseas excursions. Most teachers choose to organise one trip every two years instead of every year as American teacher do.

Expected Support

As is known, students exchange programs, teachers exchange programs, connected classrooms and maintaining partnerships with a school or university all require a language teacher’s commitment and dedication. Therefore, he/she seriously needs support on all levels.

Having discussed these issues with many teachers in NSW, I found they all wish the Department of Education would simplify the overseas excursion application procedures and reduce paperwork. It was also suggested that the Department of Education should provide funds to relieve a teacher while he/she is preparing an overseas excursion or organsing exchange programs. At the school level, ICT support and funding in the connected classrooms, and paperwork and workload reduction are needed. Teachers also need support from the school community, such as sponsorship and/or donations to overseas excursions and more parent involvement in billeting Chinese students from the sister school.

Conclusion

Teachers do need time-off to sit down to rethink their own practice, listen to other practitioners in schools and universities inside and outside Australia, have professional dialogues, recharge and update themselves. My study tour provided good opportunities for me to explore the most recent pedagogies in Chinese teaching in the international context, and has made it clearer to me that intercultural communications competence and exchange programs are essential to language teaching in NSW schools.

As we can see, making effective use of sister school relationships through well-maintained exchange programs, well-planned connected classroom lessons and teacher dedication can promote Chinese teaching and learning in NSW schools and enhance students’ intercultural communicative competence as well as language competence. In addition, teachers receive benefits too. I hope my findings in China and Taiwan are practical and workable for NSW schools and that teachers can use them in their classrooms. A greater success can be expected if there is more support for language teachers from diverse sources.

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