Modern Technologies in Chinese Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This paper discusses the applications of modern technology in Chinese language teaching and learning. The paper first analyzes the potential use of the modern technology in Chinese language teaching and learning from the following three aspects: Chinese words processors, Multimedia products and the Internet. Then describes the current situations of the applications of modern technology in Chinese teaching and learning. According to the author, Chinese words processors are widely used, but standards are greatly needed; Some multimedia products have been produced, but are still far from enough, and the quality need to be further improved; Websites about Chinese learning and teaching have been set up, but are not widely and fully integrated in Chinese teaching and learning. The paper also analyzes the reasons that prevent the modern technology from being fully used, and finally proposed some solutions.
Presentation Outline

1. Introduction

2. The potential applications of modern technology in Chinese teaching and learning

3. Current situations of the application

4. Reasons for preventing the modern technology from being fully used

5. Proposed Solutions

Discussion Questions

1. What are the other potential aspects of modern technology that could be used in language teaching and learning?

2. What are the special characteristics of web-based language teaching programs, compared with other distant education program?

3. What motivational strategies can be used in distant language teaching programs?

4. Do you have any suggestions for helping a web-based language teaching program profitable?
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I. Introduction

Research on the role of technology in teaching and learning has been conducted for years. There are two typical views about this issue in the field of educational technology. One of them is that technology plays an important role in teaching and learning; it will enable the learners to learn more efficiently and effectively (Kozma, 1994; Liu, 2000). The other view is that technology itself will not influence the result of learning and teaching (Clark, 1983; Clark 1994). Clark used an analogy to explain his position on the latter view: instructional media “are mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence students achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in our nutrition” (Clark, 1983, p445).

Similar debates also exist in the attitudes towards application of modern technologies in Chinese teaching and learning. While some instructors and institutions are very enthusiastic to embrace computers and the Internet into Chinese teaching (Cao, 2000; Xiong, 2000; Zhang, 2000; Zhang, 1998), others are lukewarm about using them and even skeptical (Fang, 2000; Xie, 2000). Based on my experience of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, I think that whether certain media are effective in teaching and learning or not depends on the way we use them; and before that we should find out their potentiality.

Therefore, in this paper, I will first examine what computers and the Internet can bring to Chinese teaching and learning, and study what the current state is, and then
analyze the reasons why they are not being fully used, and finally try to find some solutions.

II. What Can Computers and The Internet Bring To Chinese Teaching and Learning?

In this part, I will study this question from the following three perspectives: (1) what Chinese word processors can bring to Chinese teaching and learning (2) what multimedia technology can bring to Chinese teaching and learning  and (3) what the Internet can bring to Chinese teaching and learning.

2.1 Chinese Word-processors

Word-processors are useful tools in learning foreign languages. Besides having the main functions of an English word-processor such as composing and editing, Chinese word-processors can also help students learn Chinese characters. Among the various methods to input Chinese characters into computers, there are two most popular ways. One is using Pinyin\(^1\): students type Pinyin of the characters from the keyboard, and the computer will convert Pinyin into Chinese characters. Since this method requires students to know how to pronounce the character first, it encourages students to read Chinese characters they want to input; Moreover, a group of characters with the same pronunciation will appear when students input a Pinyin, the students have to identify the proper one from the homonyms.

\(^1\) Pinyin: the standard system of transcribing Chinese into Latin script, which was officially endorsed in China in 1958. It is employed wherever there is a need to indicate pronunciation.
Another popular way of inputting Chinese characters is to encode the radicals that constitute characters. The students have to tell what radicals each character has, and this will help them to be more familiar with the characters.

Thus using computer to input Chinese texts can enhance the students’ capability in reading, memorizing and recognizing characters and in learning words (Xie, 1999; Liang, 2000).

However, some scholars worry that using computer in teaching Chinese characters will decrease the students’ abilities in character writing, and influence the recognition of characters in the long term (Zhang, 1998).

I personally think Chinese word-processors play a positive role in teaching helping students to learn Chinese characters. Of course it should not completely take the place of writing characters by hand.

2.2 Multimedia Products

Multimedia software can combine sound, pictures, and texts together. It can help students learn Chinese in multi-dimensions. Students cannot only learn Chinese through reading the words, sentences and texts, but can also watch the real situation where the conversations happen, and interact with it (Fang, 2000; Wang, 2000; Xie, 1999).

With the help of the multimedia technology, teachers need not spend much time explaining the meaning of some new words with media language other than target language-Chinese. It is more convenient for teachers to set up a language context for students to practice the sentences they have learned.

Computers can make Chinese teaching more learner-centered. It is more convenient for the students to choose the parts they want to listen to and watch more, and skip the
parts with which they have felt comfortable. Computer also can help students to learn more actively (Zhang, 1998). Besides receiving input from computers by listening, watching, reading, students also could practice speaking with computers, do written exercises on computers. Computer could also give immediate feedback to students. It can tell students whether there are some problems with their pronunciation, the words they choose, and the sentences they make. These interactive functions make language learning more interesting. Students can practice with computers at any time, and practice as many times as they would like. And they need not worry about whether their classmates will laugh at their mistakes, and whether the teacher has enough patience or not (Liu, 2000; Wang & Ye, 2000; Zhang, 1998).

2.3 The Internet

The Internet not only connects computers together, but also connects people together. It cannot only transmit written materials, but can transmit sounds, images as well (Chen, 2000; Xie, 1999).

With the Internet, teachers can share their experience and resources with each other. They can refer to the lesson plans and exercises other teachers have published in the Internet when they prepare their lessons. They also can upload the information they think useful to the Internet. Sharing information make Chinese teaching more efficient (Yuan, 2000).

With the Internet, students can learn Chinese not only from their teachers, but also from teachers in other places. They can listen to the Chinese songs, stories and news etc. on-line; they also can read abundant authentic Chinese texts from the Internet. They can practice their spoken Chinese in chat room with native Chinese speakers, and also can
practice their writing skills by writing Chinese emails with their key-pals (Ma, 2000; Xie, 1999).

Moreover, the Internet makes Chinese teaching and learning more flexible. Teachers can give classes at home. Students do not need to go to a school to take Chinese lessons. The classes can be given and taken on-line anywhere at any time (Baber, 2002; Xie, 1999).

And finally the Internet can make Chinese teaching and learning more cost-effective (Chen, 2000). Besides providing abundant resources for Chinese teaching and learning, most of the resources on the Internet are free.

III. Current Situations

This part studies the current states about how well these technologies are being used in Chinese teaching and learning and what problems exist. The data used in the part are based on papers I read, surveys, and personal communications with some Chinese language teachers, web builders both in Mainland China and the United States.

3.1 Chinese Word Processors are widely used. But standards are badly in need.

There are hundreds of schemes to input Chinese simplified characters into computer in Mainland China which run under Chinese versions of Microsoft Windows and Office. There is also a lot of software to input Chinese characters based on the English versions such as Chinese Star, Njstar, Twin Bridge etc.. Almost all the Chinese teachers use Chinese word processors in their teaching process (not limited to class activities). And at least 80 percent of students who learn Chinese in Mainland China know how to input
Chinese characters in computer after they finish their language study. Many Chinese programs in the U.S. teach students to use computer to input Chinese characters as well.

But like the issue of whether to teach simplified characters or traditional characters, different word processor use different encoding systems to input Chinese, which results in lack of compatibility among the software, and hence somewhat decreases the interest of students in using this tool.

Therefore, it is highly necessary that Chinese software be made according to a universal standard. In this way, teachers and students need not worry about whether Chinese software can run on their computers when they buy it; and the effectiveness of the word-processors can be further improved.

3.2. Some multimedia products are produced, but far from enough, and quality needs to improve.

Many multimedia products have been developed in the field of Chinese teaching and learning. Following are some examples:

Software for teaching Chinese characters/writing such as *Chinese Character Tutor* (Yao & Peterson, 1985), *Chinese Radical* (Tzeng, 1992), *Learning Chinese Characters* (Sun, 2000).

Software for teaching Chinese pronunciation such as *Chinese Pronunciation Tutor* (Yu, 1990), *HyperFaYin* (Tzeng, 1993).

Software for Teaching Spoken Chinese such as *Learning Spoken Chinese* (1992, Hua Yuan Technology Corporation), *Chinese Survival Manual* (Yu, 1993),

Software for Teaching Reading in Chinese such as *A Multimedia Chinese Reader* (Mowry, 1993).
Compared with software that teaches other foreign languages, the quantities of Chinese software are far from enough. Among the limited products, the quality of some of them needs to improve. Take the CD-Rom of Intermediate Chinese (Beijing Language and Culture University, 1999) for example, though there are interactive exercises, words and text explanations in it, most of the information is only presented in the form of text files. Images and sounds files are very limited. The potential of multimedia is not maximized.

Another phenomenon is worthy to be noticed. There are relatively more products produced in the U.S., but very few of them are known in China. The communication and exchange between the field of Chinese teaching in domestic China and abroad needs to develop further (Alber, 1996).

3.3 Websites about Chinese teaching and learning have been set up, but they are not widely and fully integrated into class.

Searching websites about “Chinese teaching and Learning” with searching engine provided by http://www.excite.com, 2,236,040 websites (only in English) show up (retrieved on Dec.3, 2001). Of course, not all of the websites the engine found are for teaching and learning Chinese. For instance, top 8th of the 2,236,040 websites is http://www.chinesebookco.com, which is about wholesaling and retailing books, audio tapes and CDs for people who want to teach their children or themselves the Chinese language. These websites can be classified into different categories according to the content.

1) Only providing information about Chinese history, culture, Chinese language and characters etc.
For instance, http://www1.moe.edu.sg/ACC/index.htm, is a website hosted by Committee of Chinese Culture and History, Singapore; from it, we can find a lot of information about Chinese culture and history. Http://www.ocrat.com is a website hosted by Ocrat Company about writing Chinese characters.

Most of the websites belong to this category. These websites help Chinese teachers to be better prepared for their class, and help students to learn more about Chinese language and culture outside class. This kind of websites is most widely used. However, their value in Chinese teaching and learning is still not fully realized. In most cases, teachers visit these websites just for reference; students surf on these websites only for their personal interest.

Though some Chinese teachers give the information they find from the websites to students by handouts as supplementary materials for textbooks, only very few of them design some activities to encourage students combine surfing on the Internet with learning Chinese purposely.

2) Providing some web-based instructions and practices. This kind of websites usually is not independent, and is related to Chinese programs. Such as http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~clp/China/web-t.htm developed by Chinese Program at Harvard University; http://chinese.ucdavis.edu/chinese.htm developed by University of California, Davis.

These websites are usually designed as a supplement to the language program. The content includes instructions and practices about pronunciations, words explanation, reading comprehension, listening comprehension etc., some websites even publish some good lesson plans. This kind of websites is especially useful to Chinese teaching and
learning. Teachers can save time and efforts when preparing for their class by referring to the lesson plan and practice the websites provide, and hence could spend the time and efforts they saved on studying what the websites have not developed. Students can use the instruction and practice to enrich what they learn from class.

Unfortunately, the resources of these websites are not widely used. Not many teachers refer to these websites in their teaching (Molenda & Sullivan, 2002). This is not only a waste of the Internet resources, but also a big waste of Chinese teaching talents (Yuan, 2000).

3) Providing on-line courses.

This kind of websites needs registration and usually is not free. Some of the websites are hosted by companies, such as http://www.chineseon.net hosted by Chineseon.net Company. Some of the websites are hosted by universities, such as http://chinese.bendigo.latrobe.edu.au/ hosted by La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia.

After registration to the courses, students can get individual instruction from a Chinese teacher on-line. And they usually could be awarded with certificates or credits even a degree after they pass tests.

http://www.eblcu.net, which is hosted by Beijing Language and Culture University is the only one Chinese on-line language program that awards B.A. degrees to non-native Chinese speakers so far.

Though e-learning has such advantages as learner self-paced, more personal communications between instructors and learners, more flexibility in time and place. These websites are not as popular as the founders have expected. According to the founder
of http://www.chineseon.net, its on-line course only has 179 tuition paid students while it has 220 teachers (as of November, 2001).

IV. What limits the application of modern technologies in Chinese teaching and learning?

In this part, I shall analyze what limits the application of modern technologies in Chinese teaching and try to find out solutions.

4.1 Reasons

Following are factors that influence the application of modern technology to Chinese teaching and learning:

1) Teachers are not familiar with modern technology.

Though most of the Chinese teachers know how to use a Chinese word-processor and have applied them into Chinese teaching and learning, not many of them know multimedia technology and the Internet very well (Masheng, 2000). This is true especially in Mainland China. For instance, some of my former colleagues (especially old professors) still do not have their email addresses, and seldom use the Internet. The limited knowledge about modern technology constrains them from doing research on applying available technology and products into their teaching.

2) Time and money constrain teachers from using technology well.

Some teachers have realized that appropriate application of modern technology will improve Chinese teaching and learning; and they are also eager to apply it into their teaching. However, they find it not easy to do so. Collecting and selecting appropriate
multimedia products and the Internet resources cost time and money. But most schools have not taken any measures to encourage teachers to do so (Fang, 2000; Xie, 2000).

3) Improvement of modern technology asks for money and talent.

Though more and more non-native Chinese speakers start to learn Chinese, teaching Chinese as a foreign language is still not as popular as teaching English or French as a foreign language. Therefore, publishers or companies are still very cautious when they develop a multimedia product about Chinese teaching and learning. Independent Chinese websites owners are also faced with the similar problem.

Moreover, there are not many experts who know both Chinese teaching and learning and modern technology well (Fang, 2000; Ma, 2000); and there are not many talented people who are willing to stimulate the communications between companies and Chinese programs. These result in that the products that companies developed are not well received by the field of Chinese teaching and learning, which in turn influence companies to invest in this field.

4.2 Solutions

Schools should take some measures to encourage teachers to learn more about modern technology, and support them with technical service. Companies and schools should cooperate more closely to put the current resources into best use. As for the teachers, we should realize that we have responsibilities to study and use all the effective methods and media, especially modern technology, to improve our teaching continuously.
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