

Current Situation of Chinese Mandarin Learning among Overseas Chinese Youth

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Abstract: Chinese-speaking teenagers represent a major force of the population learning Mandarin overseas. These teenagers face multiple challenges in learning Mandarin, including a limited language environment at home and within society, a lack of systematic language learning processes, language thinking mode influenced by "negative transfer" from English, and uneven abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For effective Mandarin teaching for overseas Chinese teenagers, it is essential to explore and address these challenges. This paper examines the motivations for overseas Chinese teenagers learning Mandarin, and proposes using systematic rules and practice methods, as well as developing teaching activities that fit their daily life and cultural background to create a conducive language learning environment, promote their language learning during their linguistic critical period, and improve their pronunciation, tone, and practice. In addition, we can also combine various forms of speech expression training such as recitation, speech, hosting, etc., to comprehensively improve the level of spoken Mandarin.

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, the trend of globalization has become increasingly apparent. Mandarin Chinese is becoming more widespread. As of now, the number of Mandarin speakers has exceeded 1.5 billion, accounting for 20% of the world's population, making it the most widely spoken language in the world. Currently, as important agencies of learning Mandarin, 548 Confucius institutes and 1,193 Confucius classrooms are in operation in 154 countries around the world.

With the increasing number of overseas Chinese population and expanding opportunities to use Mandarin on international stages, overseas Chinese parents have begun to attach more importance to their kids' Mandarin learning. According to statistics (2022 World Immigration Report), there are more than 63 million overseas Chinese and their offerings, with Chinese-speaking teenagers being the largest group learning Mandarin. Research shows that Chinese-speaking teenagers make up 70% of the population that learning Mandarin overseas. These teenagers have an advantage in listening and speaking due to the influence of their families, but there is still large room for improvement in reading and writing. Furthermore, there are significant disparities in the language proficiency of overseas Chinese-speaking teenagers. For example, the United States and Canada are gathering spots for Chinese communities in North America, but language environments for Chinese-speaking

teenagers tend to be limited, especially compared to those in Southeast Asia. This paper will focus on the unique language environment and characteristics for Chinese-speaking teenagers in North America, and discuss the strategies for teaching Mandarin to overseas Chinese-speaking teenagers.

2. Motivation for Chinese-Speaking Teenagers to Learn Mandarin

2.1 Parental Expectations Regarding Mandarin Learning for Offspring

In Chinese households, Chinese culture has a long-term impact on the lifestyle and mindset of first-generation Chinese immigrants. They have a deep emotional connection to their homeland and a strong sense of identification and belonging to Chinese culture, hoping that Chinese culture can continue to flourish in future generations. For second and third-generation Chinese immigrants teenagers, their long-term stay abroad has led to significant differences in their lifestyles and habits compared to their peers in China, resulting in their weaker identification with Chinese culture. Though the Chinese immigrants is far from China, many of their relatives still live there. As an essential mean of communication with their relatives, maintaining and passing down family relationships, and achieving cultural identification, Mandarin Chinese has become a primary learning object for oversea Chinese teenagers.

2.2 Aspiration for Chinese Culture from Chinese-Speaking Teenagers

Many Chinese-speaking teenagers are enthusiastic about learning Mandarin and hope to better understand Chinese culture through their studies. Some Chinese-speaking teenagers are born in China and move abroad due to family reasons. Therefore, they have some understanding of Chinese culture and their own experience and feelings about China. For example, in a talking practice with "My Hometown" as the topic, many Chinese-speaking teenagers in the class who emigrated from China to Canada talked about their memories and impressions of Chinese culture. They also expressed their curiosity and nostalgia for China. It can be seen that they have strong cultural identification with China and Mandarin.

3. Issues in Mandarin Learning for Chinese-American Adolescents

3.1 Limited Mandarin Learning Environment for Chinese-American Adolescents

According to the definition in the Modern Chinese Dictionary, "mother tongue" refers to the language a person first learns, usually the national language or a regional dialect. In the case of Chinese-American adolescents who were born and raised in local communities, Mandarin Chinese should still be their mother tongue. However, in reality, local languages usually replaces Mandarin as the first language for Chinese-American adolescents. Compared to adolescents with bilingual family and social language environments, Chinese-American adolescents have very limited language environments.

Moreover, the proficiency in Mandarin Chinese within Chinese-American families varies greatly depending on different family situations, showing an overall deficient. Among the Chinese-American community, there are second-generation, third-generation, and earlier immigrant groups, with later generations having a weaker grasp of Mandarin. Many Chinese-American families hope that their children can speak Mandarin and encourage them to express themselves in Mandarin. However, Mandarin is only used within the Chinese-American family communication. As children grow up and start school, the frequency of Mandarin usage decreases, and the local language gradually takes over. When children prefer and become more accustomed to using the local language as their primary language, the Mandarin language environment within the family is threatened and becomes increasingly limited.

The beginning of first language acquisition is through listening to sounds and observing lip movements, gradually imitating and learning the most commonly used spoken language from parents' mouths. Therefore, listening and speaking skills take precedence of language learning. The starting point for Mandarin learning of Chinese-American adolescents is the same as that of adolescents in China, both through oral transmission within family settings. However, in the preschool stage, adolescents in China demonstrate advantages that Chinese-American adolescents cannot compare to—the immersion of the social language environment. This gap in language learning becomes more apparent when they go to schools. From kindergarten to adulthood, adolescents in China have a crucial language subject, Chinese, in their learning process, which plays a significant role in language acquisition. Lacking systematic Chinese language learning for Chinese-American adolescents hinders the improvement of their reading and writing abilities.

Extensive training in reading and writing systems enhances language learners' comprehension of semantics, enabling them to grasp the deeper meanings of the language^[1]. After mastering pinyin and basic Chinese character writing, this systematic training empowers learners to sustain autonomous learning of Mandarin, rather than mere imitation. However, Chinese-American youth primarily use the local language after enrolling in schools, lacking systematic training in Mandarin reading and writing. This not only makes their language learning more prone to fossilization, but also results in a higher incidence of pronunciation issues in spoken Mandarin.

3.2 Language Thinking Influenced by "Negative Transfer" from English

During the process of teaching Mandarin to overseas Chinese youth, it has been observed that Chinese-American youth whose first language is English are significantly influenced by English grammar in their Mandarin expression. Chinese-American youth tend to express themselves using the English word order, which they are more familiar with^[2]. For expressions with adverbial phrases, it is common to find a postposition of the adverbial phrase. For example, a student might say, "Mom will let me drink a glass of milk while I'm sleeping", whereas the correct word order should be "Every night before going to sleep, my mom will make me drink a glass of milk". In expressions, there may also be omissions of time and spatial determiners. In most cases, these issues do not hinder understanding by the listener but are not conducive to Chinese-American youth developing long-term correct Mandarin oral grammar.

3.3 Mandarin Pronunciation Heavily Influenced by Family Members' Accent

Most second-generation Chinese-Americans' parents can speak Mandarin. However, due to their long-term integration into local communities, even third-generation and some second-generation Chinese-Americans have essentially lost their proficiency in Chinese language^[3]. Some of their elder family members might possess certain dialectal characteristics in their Mandarin pronunciation.

For example, a boy in a Chinese American family has a serious accent problem. He pronounces the fourth tone as the second tone, and the neutral tone as the fourth tone. In his oral expression, he uses some specific Northeast dialect words in colloquial spoken Chinese. In fact, the child lived with his aunt who has a strong Northeast accent. He was influenced by his family language environment and unconsciously developed a Northeastern accent. In the teaching of Mandarin pronunciation, these long-formed pronunciation errors are difficult to correct in a short period of time.

Compared to Northeastern dialect in China, the differences between some Chinese southern dialects and Mandarin Chinese are very obvious. When encountering parents who are originally from Guangdong province and communicate in Cantonese at home, the child can only understand Cantonese. Although Cantonese is a dialect Chinese, it differs greatly from Mandarin Chinese, resulting in the child can not speak Mandarin at all. The phonetic pronunciation of Chinese-American children is directly influenced by their family language environment, which leads to significant differences in their oral and pronunciation problems.

4. Chinese-American Teenagers' Difficulties in Persisting Mandarin Learning

In the process of Chinese-American teenagers' Mandarin learning, poor persistence is commonly encountered. They prone to losing interest in Mandarin learning, generating negative emotions in learning, and impacting learning outcomes. Factors influencing teenagers' interest in language learning include objective and subjective ones. Regarding subjective factors, language learning, especially second language learning, requires a substantial amount of comprehensible input as a prerequisite. However, sufficient comprehensible input is only a necessary condition, not a sufficient one. According to the "affective filter hypothesis," comprehensible language input can only be effectively absorbed by learners after passing through an emotional filter, thereby transforming into language acquisition abilities^[4]. In this process, emotional factors play an important role in second language acquisition.

In the process of learning a second language, subjective interest play a significant role. Many Chinese-American teenagers lose interest in Mandarin due to the lack of significant progress in language learning within a short period, or compared to other hobbies that may appear more exciting.

Furthermore, the lack of knowledge about Chinese traditional cultural background among Chinese-American students makes it difficult to effectively carry out many curriculum exercises. Some related teaching activities have attempted to integrate Chinese traditional culture with Mandarin phonetic learning, changing the course structure to increase teenagers' enthusiasm in learning. However, due to limited understanding of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese-American are unable to effectively cooperate and complete the course projects. For example, when performing short exercises during the teaching process using traditional Chinese festivals such as Chinese New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival, and Dragon Boat Festival, the level of understanding of these festivals among Chinese-American teenagers is very limited compared to Chinese teenagers who are familiar with them.

5. Conclusion

Language is a tool for adolescents to learn and understand the world. For Chinese youths, Mandarin serves as a link between them and Chinese culture. To address the challenges Chinese-speaking youths face in learning Mandarin, it is necessary not only to assist them in recognizing and reading Chinese characters, correcting their pronunciation and strengthening their intonation, but also to develop teaching activities that fit their daily life scenarios, alongside traditional Chinese cultural content. Based on this, the quality of their oral expression should be trained.

In Chinese, the same sentence may express different meanings depending on the difference in pauses and intonations. To ensure that the intended message is accurately conveyed, it is essential to use language expression techniques with precision. At the same time, we combine various forms of language expression training such as recitation, speech, hosting, etc., through diversified and structured exercises, students can improve their spoken Mandarin.

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