



Voices from the Field

Perspectives on world language education as intercultural learning: A conversation with a Mandarin teacher

Xiaofan Chen, interviewed by Casey Man Kong Lum

Xiaofan, thank you very much for agreeing to share your experience and insights. To begin with, how do you conceptualize and describe world language education as intercultural education and why?

As a world language teacher, I believe we should not only focus on students' linguistic proficiency but also their ability to interact appropriately and effectively with people from different cultures. In the classroom, teachers should guide students to compare cultures with critical thinking and to question stereotypes and learn to communicate with meaningful context. The purpose of learning a language in this global world is not only just developing linguistic skills but also helping students navigate in or among diverse communities and having the ability to understand and respect different cultures. This will help them become global citizens.

By extension, what do you think students should expect to learn from studying world languages and why?

Linguistically, students develop four skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This allows them to explore new environments and exchange new information. Culturally, students can learn about values in life through different cultural perspectives. One of our goals is to help students realize that they can see the world from diverse perspectives.

From your experience, and from your exposure to professional colleagues in your field over the years, what have been some of the key challenges facing students (at the grade levels you're familiar with) studying Mandarin and why?

The first challenge is definitely tones. Mandarin is a tonal language, which is very different from English. The same syllable in Mandarin can mean completely different things depending on the tone. Students often struggle to hear, repeat, and differentiate tones in Mandarin.

Secondly, learning to write the Chinese characters – as opposed to the phonetic alphabet in English, for example – is also very challenging to students. Many characters provide no phonetic clues for pronunciation, and a lot of times students need to learn both pinyin, the Chinese phonetic alphabet, and characters at the same time. This requires a lot of time spent in memorization and it can cause frustration.

Thirdly, it is very hard for students to find authentic Mandarin language environments. My students are lucky to live in one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse cities in the world (New York City) and can access real life Mandarin speaking environments, such as Chinatown in Manhattan or Flushing in Queens. Unfortunately, this is not the case for everyone. A lot of students who live in smaller cities have trouble finding people or places they can practice the language with or in. This might lead to students' lack of motivation and to drop the class. The difficulty of not having an authentic Mandarin language environment accessible means that in some areas, Chinese programs are being cut due to low enrollments.

From your experience and from your exposure to professional colleagues in your field over the years, what do you think are some of the best practices that Mandarin teachers use for helping their students address the challenges and why?

I've noticed when I put tones into songs and Total Physical Response (TPR) games, students tend to get more interested and have better understanding of them (e.g., Bui, 2018). Especially with TPR games, tones become muscle memory and the games increase engagement. When learning about characters, instead of pure memorization, I like to make up stories based on the character's shapes and sounds and use more visual aids to help students remember them. I also have found out that learning radicals – the basic components that offer clues to a character's meaning or pronunciation – can help students memorize characters faster (e.g., Clydesdale, n.d.). Bringing students to an authentic learning environment can also help with language learning. For example, each year we have guided trips to Chinatown and Flushing. Students can practice how to order food, greet someone, or express opinions with Chinese people in real life scenarios.

What have been some of your most gratifying experiences or outcomes as a Mandarin language teacher and why?

One of the best such outcomes is when students not only develop skills in the language but also have an interest in Chinese culture beyond the classroom. Students often try to find people with whom to practice their Mandarin outside of class, learn about Mandarin popular culture through music and TV shows, and so on. Some students also try authentic Chinese food from different regions. Some even plan trips to China! These always make me feel so rewarded as a language teacher.

What advice would you give to students in world language education who aspire to become world language teachers?

My advice to aspiring world language teachers is to stay curious and be open-minded. Language is not just studying grammar and vocabulary. It is also a way to make connections, find identity, and explore culture. A lot of times we need to figure out a way to combine the language and the culture into cohesive lessons.

To cite this article, use this format:

Chen, X., & Lum, C. M. K. (2025). Perspectives on world language education as intercultural learning: A conversation with a Mandarin teacher. *Voices from the Field, 1*. Center for Intercultural Dialogue. Available from:
<https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/2025/08/18/perspectives-on-world-language-education-as-intercultural-learning/>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

References

Bui, G. (2018). [Total physical response](#). In J. Lontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*. Oxford, UK: John Wiley and Sons.

Clydesdale, H. (n.d.). [Radicals reveal the order of Chinese characters](#). Asia Society. Accessible Aug 3, 2025.