Learning English and Chinese as Foreign Languages

Sociocultural and Comparative Perspectives

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Lin, W. C. (2019). *Learning English and Chinese as Foreign Languages: Sociocultural and Comparative Perspectives*. London: Multilingual Matters. (ISBN: 978-1-78892-513-6)

Contents

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Preface

This book derives from socio-cultural fieldwork carried out in Taiwan and England between 2004 to 2015. The first phase was carried out mainly in 2004 and 2005 in four Taiwanese secondary schools, the second between 2013 and 2016, when I travelled to England for fieldwork. In order to maintain methodological continuity between them as cross-cultural comparative investigations of young people's foreign language learning, both followed a Vygotsky-inspired socio-cultural framework. Socio-cultural perspectives have grown in influence on the development of the field of second language acquisition (SLA), arguing that language learning does not take place in a social vacuum. It involves engagement of ideas among people, developed in everyday practice and shaped by social and cultural factors. Work from the first phase generated very rich findings which were disseminated to the academic world through several journal articles in the past few years. However, since a single paper has to focus on relatively narrow aspects in limited journal space, findings from these separate articles inevitably failed to provide a sufficiently holistic view of English as a foreign language (EFL) learning in Taiwanese schools, homes and communities. I kept feeling that there was need to disseminate these findings in full and in book format, providing more complete pictures of EFL learning and teaching practices with readers both in Taiwan and abroad.

In addition, three timely inspirations have propelled me to write this book. In 2014, the first came from the call for book projects from the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) in Taiwan, part of an attempt to broaden and prolong the impact of social scientific research because "books tend to last longer". The next lay in rising interest in learning Mandarin Chinese worldwide. Chinese, my mother-tongue, appears to be growing in popularity with learners, young and old, including those in Anglophone countries such as Britain, Australia and the U.S. The third grew from realisation that very little is known about differences in students' choices, experiences and difficulties in learning Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) in secondary schools in countries where it has been a recent addition to school curricula.

With these considerations in mind, the ultimate purpose of this book is to enhance our understanding of the processes whereby young people in Taiwan and Britain recognise, access and value English or Chinese as foreign languages at school, home or in the community. Hopefully, by comparing schools within the distinctive social and cultural settings of Taiwan and Britain, we are able to use another culture's "lens" to see things from new analytical angles and improve our understanding of the limitations and strengths of our own educational practice and challenge our taken-for-granted viewpoints towards the familiar everyday practices of foreign language teaching and learning within our own cultures.

Wen-Chuan Lin September, 2019

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Foreword

Some fifty years ago, my director of undergraduate studies, Robert Bolgar, said that anything one wrote should be put in a drawer for a couple of years, and then re-read. If one still thought it was worthwhile, then one should seek to publish. Although I have not always been able to follow this advice, I remember it as a warning about the rush to publication which bedevils current academic life.

One striking feature of this book is its long period of gestation. Work and thought over a decade and more is published here. In today's academic world, which mirrors the world in general, this devotion to writing is an admirable endeavour, and one which has met the quality test Dr Bolgar recommended to us.

I have known Wen-Chuan Lin for only a part of the period covered by his book. In fact I know him as 'Richard' Lin because that is how he introduced himself, and this English name-identity has stuck in my mind. Richard's Chinese and English names reflect his professional identification with the two phenomena of Chinese and English as foreign languages. This places him in an ideal position to reflect on both. He is, I am sure he would agree, not bicultural, although he is certainly bilingual to a very high degree. He is on the contrary an intercultural person who has used his experience and perspectives to analyse two language teaching and learning situations. Studying the Taiwan context whilst being a researcher in British universities has given him new insights into the familiar, into the pedagogical world in which he grew up as a learner and teacher. Seeking in-depth experience of situations of Chinese as a foreign language in British schools has made him familiar with a new and strange educational world. Using both perspectives, he has made the strange familiar and the familiar strange – to use that old ethnographer's phrase – for himself and his readers, whether in Taiwan, Britain or beyond.

Using an analytical framework from Comparative Education is an additional and very valuable dimension. As Richard/Wen-Chuan says, comparison is inherent in our modes of understanding. He himself no doubt used comparison, inevitably if not always consciously, in his fieldwork and analysis. His readers will do the same. It is therefore important that he has provided a systematic and theoretically well-founded way of doing so, since comparison can be of two kinds. Comparison can lead to evaluation – X is better than Y – and it can lead to new insights – seeing X makes us see Y differently and vice versa. It is the second which we should pursue, and a systematic comparative methodology ensures we do so. Comparison as evaluation is seldom if ever productive, as Richard's quote from Michael Sadler and his famous garden analogy reminds us.

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It is now a commonplace to refer to the globalized world and the significance of language learning, and therefore of language teaching of a specific, intercultural kind. I need not add to the usual remarks. Richard's book is written in that context and *inter alia* is a response to it. Readers will find a book with this general, wide scope but also – and this is less common and the particular value of this work – a deep focus on specific issues raised from the decade-long work to which I alluded above. I am sure readers will enjoy and learn, just as Richard himself has done. I can only congratulate the latter on his achievement and encourage the former to delve into this substantial and innovative work.

Michael Byram September, 2019

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