

EVERYDAY CHINESE LISTENING PROFICIENCY GUIDELINES : A CASE STUDY OF CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

This article is to study and propose a Chinese listening proficiency guidelines for Thai students using Chulalongkorn University's Chinese-majored students as a case in focus. The guidelines obtained from this pilot project are expected to be further used to develop a standard proficiency test on Thai student's listening skills. At the same time, they can also be used for future reference to the selection and compilation of teaching materials on such topics.

1. Introduction

In our analysis of each subject in the curriculum of Chulalongkorn University Chinese language major, we first apply the so-called Language Functional Trisection as developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) to

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help summarize student's expected listening ability on each subject and to determine to which level each subject should belong. Then we conclude the principle criteria used for classifying different levels of listening proficiency.

Next we compare ACTFL Chinese listening proficiency guidelines to those of Chulalongkorn University's from two different aspects. Horizontally, we mainly discuss the similarities and differences within those three components of Language Functional Trisection, as well as other relevant contents of the guidelines. Vertically, however, we chiefly focus on different levels of progression on Chinese listening ability from novice to advanced levels. Our finding shows that in all levels not only is the listening ability of Chulalongkorn University students majoring in Chinese higher than that of ACTFL's, their level of progression grows faster than that of ACTFL's as well.

The reasons behind such differences are as follow. First, unlike ACTFL whose target group is the American general public, the Chulalongkorn University's proficiency guidelines are designed to take Thai students majoring in Chinese as their principal target. Second, since the objectives of the Chulalongkorn University's curriculum are to cultivate and prepare students for higher education or specialization, the required listening ability has to be set higher, due to the closeness (in terms of language typology) between Chinese and Thai languages, Chulalongkorn University's students take grater advantage of studying

Chinese language than those of ACTFL whose native language is English.

2. ACTFL Chinese Proficiency Guidelines

The 1986 proficiency guidelines represent a hierarchy of global characterizations of integrated performance in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Each description is a representative, not an exhaustive, sample of a particular range of ability, and each level subsumes all previous levels, moving from simple to complex in an “all-before-and-more” fashion. The language-specific guidelines exemplify in Chinese the characteristics of each level of the generic guidelines. The examples do not constitute an exhaustive list or a discrete set required at a particular level, but rather the suggested functional samples of non-native ability in Chinese.

This article only focuses on listening ability, therefore, ACTFL CPG Listening is presented as follows:

Listening

These guidelines assume that all listening tasks take place in an authentic environment at a normal rate of speech using standard or near-standard norms.

Novice

The Novice level is characterized by an ability to recognize learned material and isolated words and phrases when strongly supported by context.

Novice-Low: No practical understanding of spoken Chinese. Understanding is limited to high frequency social conventions, e.g., *xièxie*, *zàijiàn*, isolated words, e.g., *Zhōngguó*, *rén*, *shū*, Chinese loan words in English, e.g., *chop suey*, and names of well-known Chinese cities, e.g., *Běijīng*, *Táiběi*.

Novice-Mid: Sufficient comprehension to understand some memorized words within predictable areas of need. Vocabulary for comprehension is limited to simple elementary needs, basic courtesy formulae, e.g., *Nǐ hǎo ma?* *Nín guì xìng?*, and very simple memorized material relating to everyday objects and situations, e.g., *Duōshao qián?* *Wǒ mǎi bào*. Confusing of words that are similar in sound, e.g., *xǐhuan* vs. *xīwàng*, or different only in tones, e.g., *mǎi* vs. *mài*.

Novice-High: Sufficient comprehension to understand a number of memorized utterances in areas of immediate need. Comprehends some sentence-length utterances in situations where the context aids understanding, such as at the table, in a restaurant or store, or on a train or bus. Phrases recognized have for the most part been pre-learned, e.g., *Qǐng hē chá*. Comprehends limited vocabulary and some simple questions/statements about family members, age, address, weather, time, daily activities, and interests, e.g., *Jiějie jǐsuì le?* *Nǐ xǐhuan kàn diànyǐng ma?* Misunderstandings arise from failure to identify correct word order and/or grammatical particles, e.g., *Dōu bù xiǎng mǎi*. vs. *Bù dōu xiǎng mǎi*. Understands even tailored speech with difficulty but gets some main ideas.

Intermediate

The intermediate level is characterized by an ability to understand main ideas and some facts from interactive exchanges and simple connected aural texts.

Intermediate-Low: Comprehension areas include such basic needs as: meals, lodging, transportation, time, simple instructions, e.g., *Sāndiǎn chà yíkè*, and routine commands, e.g., *Wǒ kànkān nǐde hùzhào*. Misunderstandings frequently arise from lack of vocabulary or from faulty processing of syntactic information often caused by strong interference from the native language, e.g., *dào Shànghǎi zuò huǒchē* vs. *zuò huǒchē dào Shànghǎi*, or by the imperfect and partial acquisition of Chinese grammar, e.g., *zuǒbiānrde chēzhàn* vs. *chēzhànde zuǒbiānr*, or lexical items, e.g., *shàng yízhàn* vs. *xià yízhàn*.

Intermediate-Mid: Limited understanding of topics beyond a variety of survival needs, such as personal history and leisure time activities, e.g., *Nǐ shì zài nǎ zhǎngdà de?* Evidence of beginning to understand basic constructions, such as comparatives, e.g., *gēn...yíyàng*, and directional endings, e.g., *V + chūqù*. Evidence that major word-order differences are understood, e.g., pre-verbal “time when” vs. post-verbal “time spent”. Understanding of grammatical structures allows

recognition of future and past references either by verbal participles, e.g., *le, zhe*, or time words, e.g., *dàqiántiān, yǐjīng*.

Intermediate-High: Able to understand major syntactic constructions, e.g., Shì-de-focus, bǎ-disposal, bèi passive, resultatives, but miscommunication still occurs with more complex patterns, e.g., jiào/ràng passive, lián-emphasis/contrast, chúle-exclusion/inclusion. Still has to ask for utterances to be repeated, shows increasing ability to use lexical, grammatical, situational, and pragmatic cues to help decode partially understood messages.

Advanced

The Advanced level is characterized by an ability to understand main ideas and most details of connected discourse on a variety of topics beyond the immediacy of the situation, including some topics where comprehension is complicated due to an unexpected sequence of events.

Advanced: Able to understand face-to-face, non-technical speech in standard Chinese spoken by a native speaker in controlled context (with repetition, rewording, deliberate enunciation, slower speed). Able to get the gist of some radio and TV broadcast if language used is not highly stylized or mixed with elements of classical Chinese. Understands everyday topics, well known current events, routine matters involving school and work, and simple description and narration about current, past, and future events, e.g., Zuìjìn Měiguóde jīngjì qíngxíng zěnmeyàng? Zhōng-Měi guānxi xiànzài yǒu shénme xīnde fāzhǎn?

Advanced-Plus: Often shows remarkable ability and ease of understanding, but comprehension may break down under tension or pressure (including unfavorable listening conditions). May still be deficient or uneven in completely comprehending some conversations or discussions due to inadequate vocabulary or less-than-adequate knowledge of set phrases and idioms and/or more complex syntactic structures taken from classical Chinese, e.g., *hékuàng*, *zhìyú*.

Superior

The Superior level is characterized by an ability to understand concrete and abstract topics in extended discourse offered by speakers using native-like discourse strategies.

Superior: Sufficient comprehension to understand the essentials of all speech in standard Chinese, including hypothesis, supported opinion, and technical discussions within a special field. Has broad enough vocabulary that rarely has to ask for paraphrasing or explanation. Can follow accurately the essentials of conversations in reasonably clear telephone calls, radio and TV broadcasts, oral reports, and public addresses on non-technical subjects. Can understand some classical Chinese vocabulary and structures commonly used in formal speeches and broadcasts. Can understand common idioms as well as common honorific terms, and high frequency slogans. May not understand native speakers if they speak very quickly or use some slang or unfamiliar dialect or accent, but can often detect emotional overtones and make inferences (understand “between the lines”).

According to the results of this research, the following major conclusions can be made:

1) The level of the ACTFL CPG is universal. The level definitions do not specify any particular materials or teaching methods that need to be controlled but guidelines, instead, are more generalized performance criteria that must be met at each level of proficiency.

2) The components of language proficiency that underlie the ACTFL CPG descriptions entirely correspond with the communicative competence.

3.Chulalongkorn University Chinese Curriculum

The Chinese listening capability of Chulalongkorn University's students majoring in Chinese is discussed. The whole Chinese curriculum of Chulalongkorn University is considered, including the curriculum objectives, the material used in each subject, total hours, course description and teaching method. Language functional trisection (language function, language context (content) and language accuracy) is also used to analyze what listening capability each student will have when they finish each subject and decide which level of listening proficiency students should belong to, whether it is novice, intermediate or advanced. Finally, the results of the curriculum analysis is interpreted to sum up the principles used for classifying Chulalongkorn University Chinese Listening Proficiency.

Novice Level

There is sufficient comprehension to understand others speaking simple sentences in simple conversation. Vocabulary for comprehension is limited to simple elementary needs and very simple memorized material relating to everyday objects and situations. Students are able to understand rather short utterances at a slow speed. Misunderstandings arise from failure to identify correct word order or grammatical particles. Because of confusion between words that are similar in sound, students often have to ask for utterances to be repeated.

Intermediate Level

Comprehension areas include such basic needs and routine school and work areas, including the basic knowledge of the Chinese major specialized field. They have the ability to identify the main idea when listening to native Chinese teachers teaching in Chinese; in addition, they are able to understand others' opinion, oral reports and simple evaluations. Understanding of grammatical structures allows major syntactic constructions. An increasing ability to use lexical, grammatical, situational, and pragmatic cues to help decode partially understood messages is shown. Miscommunication occurs slightly with more complex patterns. Speech can be faster.

Advanced Level

A broad variety of everyday school and work situations, including within the Chinese major professional field are understood. There is sufficient comprehension to understand the essentials of all

speech in standard Chinese. There is a broad enough vocabulary that paraphrasing or explanation is rarely asked for. Students can follow accurately the essentials of conversations in oral reports, and public addresses on non-technical subjects or within the Chinese major professional field.

According to the analysis and discussion in this research, the following conclusions can be reached:

1) The Chinese Proficiency Guidelines of Chulalongkorn University is a specific classification of listening ability. We do not intend to use it as a general guideline for other university students since it is aimed to be used as a proficiency guideline for Chulalongkorn Chinese-major students.

2) The components of listening proficiency that underlie the Chulalongkorn University proficiency guideline descriptions entirely correspond with the communicative ability.

4. The Comparability of ACTFL Chinese Proficiency Guidelines and Chulalongkorn University Chinese Curriculum

ACTFL CPG was discussed and it was found that (1) CPG belongs to the universal guidelines and (2) CPG completely corresponds with so-called “communicative competence”. The Chulalongkorn University Chinese language curriculum was mainly discussed and “Chulalongkorn University Chinese Listening Proficiency Guidelines” were designed. As the result of the analysis, it is found that

Chulalongkorn University guidelines also depend upon “communicative competence”, but it is appropriate for Chulalongkorn University students only, and not for other university students, which is to say it is not universal. In this part, the difference between both guidelines is mainly discussed.

It is already known that ACTFL CPG is not based on the amount of hours, the particular teaching materials used or the pedagogical methods, whereas the Chulalongkorn University guidelines are inevitably concerned these matters. As the result, many differences are to be found between both guidelines. Therefore, both guidelines will be compared in vertical and horizontal planes. The vertical plane discusses the differences between both, dealing with the content of ability in each level. The horizontal plane will consider the progression of Chinese listening ability from novice to advanced levels.

The subjects of Chulalongkorn University Chinese curriculum can be classified into three different types: First, the Comprehensive Course, a course which practices four types of language skills namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing, such as Chinese 1 and Chinese 2. Second, the Particular Skill Course, a course which lets students practice each aspect of the ability to use language, including listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation, such as Chinese Conversation, Chinese Reading and Chinese from Audio-Visual Media. Third, the Lecture Courses which focus on training Chinese majors in professional knowledge, such as Chinese literature, Chinese grammar,

and Chinese characters. Such courses are mostly in the later years of studying.

Although our curriculum is divided into three different courses, listening proficiency training is a mutual influence between all three. At the beginning, the students have to study the comprehensive course in order to gain a basic ability in using the language. When their language ability reaches a certain level, they move onto the knowledge areas of the linguistics and literature fields. However, although the content of such courses do not correspond with communicative competence, the teaching methods of each course are helpful. The teachers try to arrange various activities, such as prepare texts before class, supplementary reading in order to let the students have opportunities to practice their reading ability, and oral reports, class discussion in order to let the students have opportunities to practice their speaking and listening ability.

Here are the conclusions of the differences between ACTFL Chinese Proficiency Guidelines and Chulalongkorn University Chinese guidelines, including further explanations:

1) The Chulalongkorn University Chinese listening proficiency guidelines only focus on the main objective of the curriculum, that is, to produce graduates who are fully adept and knowledgeable in the Chinese language and Chinese literature, so that they can study further and become Chinese language experts, Chinese language researchers or

Chinese language lecturers in the university. Unless the level of proficiency is quite high, it is impossible to reach the superior level.

2) The Chulalongkorn University Chinese listening proficiency guidelines are for students who are majoring in Chinese. Apart from learning Chinese, they have to learn about other aspects of linguistics. This is the reason why students' ability improves so quickly.

3) The Chinese language and Thai language belong to the same language family, which is the Sino-Tibetan family. Therefore, phonetics, certain common vocabulary and grammar are rather similar. This can help Thai students to learn Chinese language easier and also has an influence on the improvement of students' listening ability.

5. Everyday Chinese Listening Proficiency Guidelines:

A Case Study of Chulalongkorn University Students

According to the results of the comparison between ACTFL CPG and Chulalongkorn University Chinese listening proficiency guidelines, we can prove that although our Chinese listening guidelines are rather different from ACTFL CPG, importance is still given to communicative competence, and the Chinese listening guidelines are also very suitable for Chulalongkorn University students. In this section, "Everyday Chinese Listening Proficiency Guidelines: A Case Study of Chulalongkorn University Students" is summarized.

Novice Level

Students have sufficient comprehension in understanding others speaking simple sentences in simple conversation. Vocabulary for comprehension is limited to simple elementary needs and very simple memorized material relating to everyday objects and situations. They are able to understand rather short utterances at a slow speed. Misunderstandings arise from failure to identify correct word order or grammatical particles. Because of confusion in words that are similar in sound, often utterances are asked to be repeated.

Intermediate Level

Comprehension areas include basic needs, routine school and work areas, including the basic knowledge of the Chinese major specialized field. Students have the ability to identify the main idea when listening to native Chinese teachers teaching in Chinese as well as being able to understand others' opinion, oral reports and simple evaluations. Understanding of grammatical structures allows major syntactic constructions. An increasing ability to use lexical, grammatical, situational, and pragmatic cues to help decode partially understood messages is shown. Miscommunication slightly occurs with more complex patterns. Speech can be faster.

Advanced Level

Students have an understanding of a broad variety of everyday school and work situations, including within the Chinese major professional field. There is sufficient comprehension to understand the essentials of all speech in standard Chinese. They have a broad enough vocabulary and rarely have to ask for paraphrasing or explanation. Students can follow accurately the essentials of conversations in oral reports, and public addresses on non-technical subjects or in the Chinese major professional field.

Based on the above vertical and horizontal analysis, the following can be concluded:

1) Each aspect of the hierarchical proficiency of Chulalongkorn University Chinese curriculum is higher than the ACTFL Chinese Proficiency Guidelines.

2) The improvement of students in the Chulalongkorn University Chinese curriculum is faster than ACTFL Chinese Proficiency Guidelines.

6. The Uses of “Everyday Chinese Listening Proficiency Guidelines: A Case Study of Chulalongkorn University Students”

6.1 The Suggestion for Listening Test

1) The content of the test must be according to communicative competence, but not the progression of the students. The traditional Chinese language examination is always based on the number of

Chinese characters and grammatical structures which students learn. If two persons know 1,000 Chinese characters, but those Chinese characters are not the same, is their ability also the same? We think that students' ability is not how many Chinese characters or grammatical structures they have learned, but that concern should be given to these three conditions:

Firstly, language comprehension depends upon the qualifications and functions of the language which can be shown in general communicative skills.

Secondly, language comprehension must be according to the specific situation, and this situation is limited by social and cultural conditions.

Thirdly, the differences of language comprehension levels can mostly be seen in a particular situation. Language function should be used appropriately to achieve the purposes that they have to understand.

2) The purpose of the test is to distinguish students' listening ability, whether their ability is good enough to communicate with other people, whether students can use language as a tool of communication, and whether they can deal with various social and professional needs.

6.2 The Suggestion for Selection of the Teaching Materials

1) To comprehensively design the content of teaching materials: the use of listening and speaking materials in practicing conversations, and reading materials in practical reading on different writing styles

such as letters, factual pieces, newspapers, narration, articles, fiction etc.; these materials should be related to daily life, social situations and occupational needs; the materials should be from China or Taiwan, for authentic purposes. These materials are allocated to each level, the content should suit the social, cultural situation and students' needs.

2) To plan the usages of materials: to train the lecturers how to use materials, to supervise the practical use of the materials, to ask for the lecturers' opinions about the materials, and to adjust the materials to conform to students' needs.

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