

The Teaching of Chinese Language and Culture in Jamaica – A Case Study of the University of the West Indies, Mona and the Confucius Institute

Adrian A. Lindsay

School of Literature, Northeast Normal University,
Renmin Street No. 5268, Changchun City, Jilin Province, People's Republic of China

Abstract

The recent increase of global interest in all aspects of Chinese culture, language, economy and society has led to a growing demand for the instruction of the Chinese language/Mandarin. Mandarin is believed to be one of the most critical foreign languages to the advancement of national security and global competitiveness. Jamaica and China have had a longstanding diplomatic relationship for over 40 years. This relationship has led to the signing of bilateral agreements, the establishment of Chinese companies and businesses, and a nationwide awareness of the Chinese culture. This China-Jamaica relationship has sparked the need for locals to learn the Chinese language in an official setting to bridge the communication gap between the two peoples and to make themselves more marketable both locally and internationally. The two countries have worked together to establish Mandarin courses at the University of the West Indies (UWI) through the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, until the advent of the Confucius Institute whose aim has been to promote the Chinese language and culture in Jamaica. Despite their relentless effort to provide Mandarin courses at the university, the institute and at other institutions nationwide, there have been challenges in the areas of resourcing teachers and maintaining students' interest, as well as issues in the classroom which result from the cultural differences between teachers and students. While these challenges were evident, the university and the Confucius Institute have been working towards overcoming these challenges and have been persevering in ensuring that there is always an outlet for the dissemination of the Chinese language and culture.

Keywords: Chinese Language, Mandarin, Culture, the University of the West Indies, Caribbean, Confucius Institute, Chinese Teachers, Students, China, Jamaica

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1. Jamaica-China Relationship

Over the years, there has been a strong political relationship between China and Jamaica which has led to a steady increase in the number of Chinese who visit or migrate to Jamaica to work, tour, or invest in the country. Currently, there are a number of Chinese companies namely the China Harbour Engineering Corporation (CHEC), the Pan-Caribbean Sugar Company, and the China National Complete Plant Import & Export Corporation (COMPLANT) among others which have been actively involved in propelling the development of the country, creating job opportunities, helping workers to improve their skills, and contributing to environment protection. Additionally, there are many Chinese-owned businesses and other Chinese investors that have also helped to provide more jobs for locals across the country. Therefore, it is evident that the solid relationship between these two countries is one of the main motivational factors for the teaching and learning of the Chinese language in Jamaica.

2. Teaching Mandarin at the University of the West Indies and the Confucius Institute, Jamaica

With China being one of the country's main imports partner and one that has signed several bilateral agreements with Jamaica, there has arisen a need for Jamaicans to learn Mandarin in order to bridge the communication gap, and this has led to Mandarin being taught privately and in later the classroom setting. Mandarin as a course in the formal education system in Jamaica is still considered relatively new in comparison to other foreign languages such as Spanish and French, and so, up to this point in time, there are still not many schools that offer Mandarin. However, it was the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at the University of the West Indies, Mona campus that started out by taking the bold step towards offering Mandarin courses as electives to students who desired to learn the language. This move was later supported by Hanban (China's National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language), otherwise known as the Confucius Institute Headquarters, which established a Confucius Institute on the university campus as a unit within the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures with the main purpose of promoting the learning of the Chinese language and culture among Jamaicans.

The Confucius Institute and the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures have worked together assiduously to achieve their objective in this regard by not only offering Mandarin courses but also by hosting

events such as: The celebration of different Chinese festivals (including Chinese New Year celebrations, Spring Festival, Mid-autumn Festival and Dragon Boat Festival); Confucius Institute film of the month – this is a Chinese film that is shown at the end of each month at the Confucius Institute; Modern Languages Day – an event hosted by the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures to showcase various cultural artefacts, foods and other cultural products from various countries including China, and is attended by both university and high school students; Confucius Institute Day - an event normally held on the university campus in commemoration of the birth of Confucius and to showcase the Chinese culture by offering micro-teaching sessions for Mandarin, Kungfu and Taiji lessons, calligraphy and art displays, Chinese dance and even Chinese cooking lessons; and many more – all with the aim of piquing students' interest in learning the language and the culture. Through the concerted efforts of these two units, there has been a gradual increase in the number of students that get enrolled in the Chinese programme, especially for level 1 which had an enrolment of over 60 students in September 2016.

At present, the UWI, Mona campus offers Mandarin courses that students may choose to take as elective courses, and recently, with the introduction of culture-related courses, the university started offering Mandarin as a minor. The language courses have been mostly taught by Chinese natives who come to the university through Hanban as Mandarin instructors or volunteers who spend a minimum of one year, teaching Mandarin before returning to China. Regarding students' registration, if a student is unable to register as a full-time student at the university, there is also the option of attending evening classes at the Confucius Institute which is located on the university campus.

3. About the Mandarin Courses

Currently, at the University of the West Indies, Mona campus, the Chinese language is offered at three levels (levels 1, 2 and 3) with one level being a pre-requisite to move on to the higher level. At each level, the course is divided into three main components: grammar, conversation and listening comprehension. The grammar component comprises reading and writing, and focuses on the teaching of Chinese sentences structures, grammar points and language usage. In this class, students also learn how to recognize, read and write not only individual characters but essays as well. The conversation classes are designed to give students an opportunity to speak, i.e. practicing with vocabulary and sentence structures they have learnt in the grammar classes. Even though these classes may take different forms based on the creativity of the teacher, the teacher should speak less, and the students should speak more as they are often times given real-life scenarios in which they can apply their knowledge in a practical way. The listening comprehension classes, which are held in a language lab, are classes in which the teacher helps the students to improve their listening skills. In these classes, the teacher should train the students' ears, giving them tips on how to listen, comprehend and retain important information from what was heard. The language lab is very practical way of improving listening skills with the use of modern technology and much practice.

At the Confucius Institute, Mandarin classes are available to full-time students, working class people, and members of the neighbouring communities. These classes are held in the late evening, which is more convenient for all these people who would have been very busy in the day. The Mandarin classes offered at the Confucius Institute are divided into different classes according to their level of Mandarin which may be determined by the HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi – Chinese Language Proficiency Exam) level for which students are preparing.

4. Challenges with the Programme

While efforts have been made to keep the Chinese programme running continuously, there have been times when courses had to be put on hold for at least a semester because of the lack of Chinese teachers, which at times, were due to teachers having some kind of difficulty in applying for certain documents. This has had a serious effect on the programme as students had ended up losing interest continuing the course and/or have had to turn to learning another foreign language that was more consistent so as to be able to complete their required amount of courses for a particular semester, and this results in insufficient amount of students being left behind to continue who may again be impeded by the fact that there aren't enough students for the department to continue offering the course the following semester.

5. Challenges in the Classroom

In the classroom, the teachers who have been nurtured in the Chinese education system tend to perform based on their understanding of teaching which is sometimes based on their own experiences in the classroom in their country. In the Chinese classroom, the teacher is the authority figure and has complete control of the classroom and therefore demands utmost respect from the students. Chinese teachers are known for their teacher-centred learning approach in the classroom, which is when the teacher directs the learning, controls classroom activities and ensures a disciplined learning environment. While this approach is practiced in Jamaica, it is less and less rigidly adhered to as the students advance in the education system, that is to say that while this is a very effective

approach at the primary and high school levels, it may not necessarily be the best approach for students at the university level. Therefore, due to the failure of teachers in the past to acknowledge the fact that teacher-centred learning is not always the most effective approach, many issues have arisen between students and teachers in the classroom which always result in students discontinuing their study of the Chinese language if these problems are not resolved.

5.1 Issues from the Teacher's Perspective

1) Teachers expect students to do as they are instructed without much room for questioning their objectives. However, in a Jamaican setting, university students who are not used to the hierarchical culture in the classroom as is practiced in

China will challenge the teacher's opinions and will not simply accept information and even some rules without first questioning its validity, practicality and/or necessity.

2) Some Chinese teachers have communication issues as those with a low level of English tend to get bad results from students, especially beginners, because they are unable to express themselves well enough to provide clarity to the students.

This hinders learning as students can't understand the teacher and the teacher can't understand the students. The language barrier may also lead to misunderstanding between teachers and students which may lead to more serious and possibly unnecessary issues.

3) Teachers are not equipped with classroom management skills to deal with especially the bigger classes in a western culture. This is, in part, due to the teachers' own expectations that students will be punctual, do assignments as instructed and not be disruptive in class. However, when they finally realize that it was their duty to ensure that classroom rules are established at the beginning of the semester with constant reminders throughout, it becomes a challenge to regain control of the class, especially if the teachers were already being lenient in the beginning.

5.2 Issues from the Students' Perspective

1) Being completely oblivious to the Chinese culture and classroom ethics, students enter the classroom with the same expectations of the Chinese teacher as what they have of a local teacher. As a result of this cultural difference, students may display their "normal" behaviour in the classroom, some of which the Chinese teacher may find strange and, in some cases, disrespectful and offensive. For example, a student who needs to go to the restroom may just leave without permission from the teacher. In this case, if the teacher feels disrespected and decides to address the student, the student may or may not respond positively simply because it is the norm for the student, and this rather simple situation might later require external intervention.

2) Another issue on the part of the students is that they have to choose courses based on the requirements of their respective majors, and at times, their core classes clash with the Mandarin classes and so, students will end up being absent from a number of classes or show up late frequently, which often times does not sit well with Chinese teachers.

3) At the university, there are students who have just graduated from high school and adults who have their families, jobs and other responsibilities. Due to the socio-economic situation Jamaica, many students do not enjoy the luxury of just attending university, as some, as young as they are, are even parents, and so they have to ensure that their time and attention are split between work, home and school. Of course, "school" will get the least attention of the three, and this is reflected in frequent absences and assignments not being submitted or being submitted late. These additional responsibilities also rob students of the extra time that they should spend at home to review lessons taught and preview future lessons.

6. Overcoming the Challenges

It is important that the Chinese teacher receives adequate training in teaching the language effectively and classroom management in a foreign culture in order to be able to appropriately deal with and overcome the various challenges. This requires the teacher to conduct enough research on the culture, norms and mannerism of the people who they will be teaching. As an informed and aware teacher, the Chinese teacher is conscious of what is acceptable in this culture and is better prepared to deal with the inappropriate attitudes and behaviours displayed by students in the classroom. Where the language barrier or communication issue is concerned, it may have to be a requirement of the recruiting agency that the teacher must have a certain level of English to be able to communicate information and express their thoughts and ideas clearly. In the classroom, there is only one teacher as the foreign language teachers are not normally assigned local teaching assistants to help in the classes. However, while the assignment of teaching assistants is a brilliant idea, there are presently not enough local teachers who teach or speak Mandarin, and so this idea must remain in the pipeline until the university is able to resource more trained local teachers of Mandarin.

As it relates to maintaining order in the classroom while getting good results from the students, it is necessary that teachers undergo some form of training in classroom management that will prepare them to deal with Jamaican students. Teachers must be tactful when dealing with university students as they cannot be too strict, and they cannot be too lenient. Therefore, the teacher must develop skills in establishing and enforcing rules without creating tension in the classroom or discouraging students from continuing the course. After all, a part of the students' development at the university takes place in the classroom and therefore, it should be managed properly.

Where the issues that students face are concerned, there is very little that the teachers or administrative staff can do to assist in overcoming some of the challenges that they face, as most of them tend to be external issues that cannot be addressed in the classroom. Nonetheless, it is important to note that students who register for the Chinese courses do so out of their own interest and desire to learn the language (and culture). Therefore, it is their responsibility to do some research on their own to gain some knowledge of the culture of the people who speak the language they have chosen to learn. With even a little knowledge of the Chinese culture, the students ought to exercise patience and understanding in the classroom, and even help to bridge the cultural gap that may exist between teacher and students.

At the University of the West Indies, students may choose courses and times that are convenient for them, but in doing so, there are times when classes from different departments may clash (be at the same time). This is an issue that, at times, cannot be avoided but can be worked around by students attending classes from another stream since the content is the same. Students may also meet with the teacher for consultation during hours designated for this purpose. During consultation, the student may ask that the teacher explain the main points of the content of the class that they missed and seek clarity on whatever information that was not clearly understood. Nowadays, absenteeism and tardiness seem to be traits of this generation of students, some may have valid reasons, while others may not. However, if it is a case where these factors are affecting the student's learning and overall performance in the class, both parties need to make an effort to communicate with each other and find out how they can best address and solve these problems.

7. Conclusion

It is clear that there is an increasing need for Jamaicans to start learning Mandarin due to China's rapidly growing economy and the strong bilateral relationship that exists between Jamaica and China. The Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at the University of the West Indies, with the Confucius Institute as a unit thereof, serves as one of the hubs responsible for the dissemination of the Chinese language and culture throughout the country, and actively hosts events and provides opportunities for anyone interested in learning the language. Even though the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures and the Confucius Institute work assiduously to provide Mandarin classes and create an environment to experience the Chinese culture first-hand, there have been challenges that have affected the flow of their programme but were not serious enough to stifle their efforts to continue working towards their goal of exposing as many Jamaicans as possible to the Chinese language and culture.

Regarding the teacher-student relationship in the classroom, it is apparent that there will be misunderstandings and disappointments which may be as a result of the cultural differences between the Chinese teachers and Jamaican students. However, these differences can be overcome with information, sensitization, proper communication and a willingness of both teachers and students to work together to improve their learning experience in the classroom.

Presently, the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures and the Confucius Institute have embarked on a mission to spread the teaching of Mandarin to the other university campus, other universities, Jamaican high schools and colleges, all of which have been very receptive of this initiative despite the fact that some of the institutions have not always been consistent in offering the Mandarin course because of lack of teachers and, at times, lack of students. However, work is being done to provide better access to more qualified Chinese teacher so that more and more institutions in Jamaica may be able to offer Mandarin as a course.

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Adrian A. Lindsay is currently pursuing a PhD in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature in the School of Literature at Northeast Normal University, China. While his main area of research is in the field of Chinese Literature, his extended areas of research include Chinese-English translation and teaching Chinese as a foreign language.