

Original Paper

A Comparative Study of Second Language Programs for International Students in Chinese and American Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

With the continuous progress of internationalization, the number of international students is gradually increasing, and the development of foreign students' second language courses in colleges and universities is also flourishing. The development of foreign students' second language has been paid more and more attention by educators. The United States, as an economic power, has a good development of its foreign students' second language courses, while China, as the world's second largest economy, is also in full swing in its language courses. In this paper, we compare the second language courses of international students in Chinese and American universities, and find that there are similarities and differences in the second language courses of Chinese and American universities. The similarities are that this course is offered to all international students who have a basic knowledge of the first language. The students' learning needs are enthusiastic, and the purpose of this course is the same. The differences lie in the curriculum objectives, content and teaching mode of Chinese and American universities. The reasons for these differences are nothing more than the qualification level of students, the difficulty of learning Chinese and English, the teaching level and concept of teachers, the education system and philosophy, and the national conditions of China and the United States. Naturally, from the comparative study of the two, we can find the advantages of American colleges and universities in the teaching of foreign students' second language courses, so that Our country can learn from the methods of American colleges and universities in the treatment of the same problem, and achieve some teaching improvements according to China's national conditions.

Keywords

second language curriculum, Chinese universities, American universities, teaching

1. Introduction

Second language refers to an additional language acquired after one's first language, commonly serving as an auxiliary or lingua franca. With the accelerating trend of economic globalization, an increasing number of students pursue academic advancement outside their home countries, prompting higher education institutions worldwide to develop specialized courses for international students, for whom second language courses constitute an essential and unavoidable academic component. The conceptual scope of second language courses encompasses three dimensions: firstly, courses imparting second language knowledge to achieve communicative fluency while fostering cultural understanding, including both university-offered programs and those by external institutions; secondly, content-based instruction delivered through the second language teaching subject matter beyond linguistic knowledge; thirdly, academic disciplines cultivating theoretical and applied research capabilities that systematically develop foundational knowledge for professional application in diplomacy, commerce, journalism, cultural exchange, and education. Focusing on international undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students at Chinese and American universities, this study specifically examines second language courses as academic disciplines or majors, denoting Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL) or International Chinese Language Education in Chinese institutions, and English as a Second Language (ESL) or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programs in American universities. Through comparative analysis of curricular commonalities and divergences, this research identifies underlying pedagogical causes, extracts transferable methodologies while eliminating ineffective elements, and proposes adaptations for China's educational framework to ultimately contribute to enhancing international student education within Chinese higher education institutions.

2. The Commonalities of Second Language Courses in Chinese and American universities

Curriculum represents the outcome of social reproduction, reflecting the knowledge that dominant groups in society seek to present to students. In this context, second language courses for international students constitute the linguistic knowledge that domestic higher education institutions aim to convey to non-native learners, wherein the pedagogical significance, cultural implications, and related dimensions manifest shared underlying principles.

2.1 The Nature of the Group is the Same

First, the second language courses discussed herein exclusively target international students at tertiary institutions, who exhibit three defining characteristics: (1) As predominantly adult learners with established cognitive frameworks, they possess self-awareness regarding their learning capacities and interests, enabling psychological adaptability to second language instruction upon becoming

international students; (2) They demonstrate foundational second language proficiency, evidenced by China's Ministry of Education mandating in the Quality Standards for International Students' Higher Education in China (Trial) that "institutions shall conduct entrance examinations or assessments to ensure admitted students meet predetermined enrollment criteria," whereby students entering Chinese universities typically pass HSK Level 4 (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) or institution-specific Chinese proficiency tests, while American universities require IELTS or TOEFL scores unless applicants either used English as their primary language of communication and education since childhood or completed over one year of study at accredited higher education institutions; (3) Equipped with first language (L1) acquisition skills, they subconsciously transfer L1 learning experiences to second language acquisition, employing L1-based compensatory strategies to bridge gaps in L2 input (comprehension) and output (production), thereby facilitating relatively smoother second language learning.

2.2 The Learning needs of International Students Are the Same

International students pursue second language courses with three primary learning objectives: (1) to establish the linguistic foundation necessary for advanced academic study in host countries, enabling engagement with specialized disciplinary knowledge and acquisition of cutting-edge scientific technologies—without which proficiency, comprehension of institutionally delivered instruction in the local language becomes unattainable; (2) to ensure effective communication with local communities for successful adaptation to cultural and academic milieus; (3) to satisfy profound interest in host cultures through deeper societal understanding, as exemplified by China-studying students' strong identification with the "Tell China's Stories Well" curricular theme—reflecting their fascination with China's millennia-old civilization manifested through culinary traditions, cinematic arts, historical landmarks, calligraphic heritage, and martial arts.

2.3 The Purpose of Offering Courses in Colleges and Universities is the Same

The educational mission of fostering human growth and development remains fundamentally universal. When cultivating talent, higher education institutions—whether serving domestic or international students—operate with accountability to both learners and society, guiding students in the pursuit of knowledge, self-discovery, and ecological stewardship. Consequently, second language courses are intrinsically designed to enhance international students' communicative and academic competencies in the target language, equipping them with discipline-specific skills and foundational knowledge for advanced study. This pedagogical orientation necessitates that such programs maintain consistently high standards in faculty qualifications, pedagogical expertise, and instructional quality, thereby satisfying core requirements for ensuring educational excellence and advancing the internationalization of talent development. Simultaneously, as curricula are inherently culturally embedded, second language courses naturally function as primary conduits for transmitting local cultural paradigms. Their implementation thus facilitates cultural dissemination and fortifies the construction of cultural subjectivity within host societies.

3. The Differences between Second Language Courses in Chinese and American Universities

3.1 Course Objectives

Ralph W. Tyler, the American educator hailed as the “Father of Modern Curriculum Theory,” posited that defining educational objectives constitutes the foundational cornerstone of curriculum design, asserting that all pedagogical arrangements revolve around these goals which form the skeletal framework and animating spirit of any course. Consequently, the comparative analysis of second language curricula in Chinese and American universities must commence with examining their respective program objectives.

For Chinese institutions, the objectives for international Chinese language programs align with the overarching goals outlined in the International Chinese Language Teaching Universal Curriculum Framework published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. This framework explicitly mandates: cultivating learners’ autonomous and collaborative learning capabilities while developing effective linguistic strategies, ultimately achieving comprehensive language proficiency encompassing four dimensions: (1) fundamental linguistic knowledge, (2) practical language skills, (3) strategic competence, and (4) cultural awareness. Specifically, Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL) programs aim to: equip students with solid linguistic foundations while deepening understanding of China’s historical, geographical, social, and economic contexts; develop appreciative insight into Chinese literature and classical texts; foster critical evaluation of Chinese culture; achieve oral and written communicative fluency; and prepare graduates for careers in global Chinese language education and cultural promotion initiatives, enabling them to leverage professional expertise in practical contexts.

In the United States, institutional autonomy necessitates examining specific program exemplars. This study selects New York University’s English as a Second Language (ESL) program as representative. Its objectives emphasize: cultivating professionals with robust foundations in applied linguistics and English literacy; developing practice-oriented future educators, researchers, and leaders; establishing theoretical and practical expertise in second language acquisition and pedagogy; implementing field placements across urban settings; and honing problem-identification, analytical, and solution-design capabilities for global English teaching contexts.

Comparative analysis reveals distinct pedagogical emphases: Chinese programs prioritize affective dimensions (cultural consciousness and emotional intelligence) alongside professional training, whereas American curricula foreground practical application-oriented approaches that translate theoretical knowledge into professional implementation capabilities, expressly developing industry-ready specialists.

3.2 Course Content

The curricular content of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL) programs in Chinese universities encompasses Modern Chinese, TCSOL Pedagogy, Intercultural Communication Studies, Sino-Foreign Cultural Exchange History, Introduction to Linguistics, Pragmatics, and Classical

Chinese. While institutional emphases vary, three universal modular categories emerge: (1) foundational pedagogical knowledge and skills training covering linguistic elements (phonology, orthography, lexicology, syntax); (2) cultural literacy cultivation; and (3) cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communicative competence development. Conversely, American universities modularize second language curricula into intensive programs (for lower-proficiency international students focusing on aural/oral skills) and academic tracks (for advanced learners emphasizing literacy development). Given their specialized orientation toward international cohorts, these courses prioritize practical applicability, integrating American cultural studies alongside linguistic content through life-relevant case analyses.

Comparative examination reveals shared core components—specialized linguistic knowledge and cultural studies—yet divergences emerge from linguistic characteristics and pedagogical traditions. Chinese curricula emphasize cultivating academic literacy in Chinese, reflecting the language’s historical complexity, while exhibiting standardized content frameworks characteristic of China’s educational system. American counterparts privilege experiential immersion approaches that develop linguistic intuition through practice, maintaining flexible, student-centered content focused on practical application outcomes rather than prescribed standards.

3.3 The Teaching Mode of the Course

Instructional models constitute relatively stable pedagogical frameworks and procedural sequences established under specific educational philosophies or theoretical guidance.

Within Chinese higher education, second language courses predominantly employ teacher-centered didactic models that systematically impart established linguistic knowledge. International students typically follow structured learning sequences culminating in standardized examinations as proficiency benchmarks. While emerging approaches like flipped classrooms and task-based instruction have been integrated, the pedagogical core remains knowledge transmission through instructor exposition. Additionally, modularized skill-specific instruction—exemplified by Shanghai institutions segmenting Chinese into discrete oral, aural, character literacy, and reading components for targeted training before integrative application—addresses diverse learner profiles within immersive linguistic environments.

Conversely, American universities implement student-centered personalized pedagogy. Comprehensive syllabi detailing semester objectives and assignments are distributed pre-term, enabling learner autonomy in pace regulation. The prototypical instructional sequence involves: (1) instructor demonstration, (2) guided practice, and (3) independent application. Content transcends vocabulary drills through thematic embedding in student-relevant contexts (e.g., academic survival skills or cultural celebrations), with grammatical structures introduced organically within meaningful discourse. Multimodal activities systematically develop integrated skills, while collaborative capstone projects foster peer engagement and linguistic consolidation. Crucially, pedagogical praxis emphasizes cultivating critical thinking and analytical capabilities through seminars, presentations, and role-playing scenarios that develop cognitive flexibility alongside language proficiency.

4. The Reasons for the Differences in Second Language Courses between Chinese and American Universities

The reasons for the above-mentioned differences can be discussed from several aspects such as students, teachers and schools.

4.1 Reasons Related to Students and Language

Significant disparities exist in the academic preparedness of international students at Chinese and American universities. The majority of international students in China originate from African nations where educational systems often lag behind China's developmental stage, resulting in generally modest baseline competencies. Despite national Mandarin proficiency standards for admission, international students' second language proficiency remains predominantly elementary upon enrollment. Conversely, approximately 70% of international students in American higher education are Asian, with nearly 30% being Chinese nationals—a cohort that typically demonstrates significantly higher academic preparedness prior to matriculation. This differential student profile constitutes a fundamental variable influencing second language curriculum design in both contexts.

Linguistically, Mandarin is widely acknowledged as possessing greater typological complexity than English, particularly for L2 learners. This relative difficulty stems from two primary factors: (1) the formidable challenge of character recognition, where the logographic writing system requires mastery of orders-of-magnitude more discrete units than alphabetic systems; and (2) the absence of a unified paradigmatic framework for Chinese grammar. Unlike English with its rule-governed syntactic structures, Chinese grammatical patterns emerge through descriptive generalization of linguistic phenomena, presenting significant challenges in systematic rule acquisition. Consequently, the cognitive demands of Mandarin acquisition differ substantially from those of English language learning for international students.

4.2 Reasons Related to Teachers

China's Ministry of Education mandates high-caliber faculty for international student education, requiring demonstrated expertise in specialized disciplines, foreign language proficiency, pedagogical qualifications, and cross-cultural competencies. However, the absence of standardized evaluation mechanisms for second language instructors results in variable teaching quality, with many adhering to conventional pedagogical models. While possessing comprehensive teaching frameworks, these approaches exhibit greater rigidity than American counterparts, characterized by standardized and uniform methodologies. Furthermore, most Chinese second language instructors embody collectivist educational values prioritizing societal benefit over individual interests, frequently conveying notions of social contribution during instruction.

Conversely, American educators explicitly recognize the correlation between linguistic immersion environments and acquisition outcomes, actively facilitating international students' engagement with local peers through collaborative assignments and experiential activities that reinforce language retention. Crucially, they acknowledge the direct nexus between identity formation and education,

employing culturally responsive pedagogy that consciously accommodates students' racial, national, and gender identities. This pedagogical philosophy necessitates instructors' profound linguistic mastery and deep sociopolitical-cultural literacy, enabling effective cultural scaffolding. Additionally, American faculty emphasize individualistic educational paradigms centered on personal development—viewing self-actualization as instrumental to national progress—thus presenting fundamentally distinct value orientations from Chinese pedagogical approaches.

4.3 Reasons Related to Education and the State

Firstly, the divergence in educational philosophy is evident. The global preeminence of American education is exemplified by Harvard University's "liberal arts education" philosophy. Both U.S. higher education and its broader educational system adhere to a quality-oriented approach, prioritizing human development over utilitarianism. They emphasize students' spiritual enrichment and aesthetic cultivation, fostering proactive engagement with life and joyful self-fulfillment. Consequently, the distinction between specialized and extracurricular education in the U.S. remains minimal, as both guide students to authentically experience life and comprehend the world. This environment encourages proactive learning, diminishes timidity, promotes communication, and enhances intellectual capabilities. In contrast, China's educational foundation is fundamentally exam-oriented – a model necessitated by its national conditions. As a socialist state confronting the principal contradiction between "the people's ever-growing needs for a better life and unbalanced, inadequate development," this system ensures equitable educational access for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. While potentially fostering utilitarianism and constraining creativity/expressiveness, it primarily facilitates social mobility, optimizes talent circulation across strata, rationalizes resource allocation, and stimulates societal enthusiasm for knowledge acquisition.

Secondly, institutional disparities significantly impact second-language education in Chinese and American universities. The U.S. system operates under a paradigm of "accessible admission yet rigorous graduation standards." While offering broad enrollment opportunities internationally, fulfilling degree requirements entails substantial academic rigor, resulting in heavy workloads and significant pressure. Conversely, China's system follows a pattern of "competitive admission yet relatively attainable graduation." Post-admission academic demands are often less stringent, which may engender student complacency and impede comprehensive curriculum implementation.

Finally, national contexts critically shape approaches to second-language instruction for international students. The United States, as a multiethnic "nation of immigrants," embodies profound cultural pluralism. Its universities possess extensive experience navigating cultural integration and ethnic diversity, cultivating exceptional cultural inclusiveness. Its historical status as a "superpower" further attracts global talent, underpinning well-developed frameworks for international student development. China's distinct cultural landscape, characterized by its historical depth and unique continuity, presents international students with a rich yet complex learning environment requiring sustained engagement. As a "developing nation," China's international education sector has only recently expanded, resulting

in underdeveloped institutional mechanisms and limited theoretical models for reference.

5. Conclusion

Based on comparative analysis, U.S. higher education institutions demonstrate well-structured second-language curricula for international students, reflecting comprehensive educational strategies and development planning for this demographic. Consequently, China may draw valuable insights from such models to enhance its own curriculum implementation and pedagogical approaches for international students. Specifically:

5.1 Enhancing Classroom Interaction and Creating a Supportive Learning Atmosphere

American universities predominantly employ small-class teaching for language courses, incorporating diverse interactive methodologies such as group discussions, cooperative games, classroom debates, and role-playing activities. These approaches significantly enhance classroom dynamics and learning engagement. While Chinese universities may face challenges in implementing full small-class instruction, educators can nevertheless improve classroom atmosphere by: (1) designing more interactive teaching activities; (2) compiling richer teaching resources; and (3) employing varied instructional methods to increase both the enjoyment and effectiveness of second language acquisition.

5.2 Balancing Structured Planning with Instructional Flexibility

Chinese language instructors typically present comprehensive course materials - including syllabi, teaching content, learning objectives, and assessment criteria - during initial sessions, with minimal subsequent modification. However, as learners' language proficiency develops throughout the course, instructors should adopt more adaptive approaches by: (1) regularly collecting and responding to student feedback; (2) dynamically adjusting teaching content and methodologies; and (3) tailoring instruction to address emerging learning needs. This responsive teaching paradigm will significantly strengthen international students' second language mastery.

5.3 Diversifying After-Class Assignments

While homework assignments remain fundamental to language education, the predominant focus on mechanical exercises in Chinese universities proves inadequate for second language acquisition. We recommend diversifying assignments through: (1) self-directed reading of Chinese articles with vocabulary study; (2) classroom discussions of Chinese films; (3) creative Chinese writing tasks; and (4) collaborative performance projects. Such varied assignments will simultaneously enhance linguistic competence and cultural understanding.

5.4 Implementing Regular Formative Assessments

Systematic classroom assessments serve crucial functions in: (1) monitoring learning progress; (2) reinforcing current lesson content; and (3) consolidating previously acquired knowledge. Assessment formats should include diverse modalities such as vocabulary definition, word combination exercises, sentence restructuring tasks, and synonym/antonym identification. When combined with effective incentive mechanisms, these frequent assessments will significantly motivate language learning.

5.5 Optimizing Digital Learning Platforms for Interactive Education

While Chinese universities have adopted online learning platforms, current usage remains predominantly unidirectional (teacher-to-student content delivery). Institutions should transform these into interactive learning spaces by: (1) developing bilateral communication channels; (2) facilitating peer discussion forums; (3) implementing timely assignment feedback systems; and (4) creating adaptive learning modules. Such comprehensive digital integration will enhance autonomous learning capabilities while developing critical thinking skills essential for professional development.

5.6 Strengthening Faculty Development Programs

Given instructors' pivotal role in second language acquisition, Chinese universities must prioritize comprehensive teacher training programs that address: (1) advanced pedagogical skills for language teaching; (2) deep content knowledge and cultural literacy; (3) professional ethics and personal conduct; and (4) alignment with core Chinese values. This multifaceted approach will ensure effective language instruction while promoting international students' appreciation and understanding of traditional Chinese culture.

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