

# Maximizing Use of the Target Language in Beginning Chinese Language Classroom

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**Abstract:** Maximizing use of the target language in foreign language classrooms is difficult, especially when students' first language is largely different from the target language (Hall & Cook, 2012). The challenge becomes greater in beginning-level classes as students' target language proficiency is limited because they are still learning the basics. Instructors are supposed to create a communicative environment to immerse students in the target language. This study investigates strategies employed by a trained Chinese language instructor to maximize use of the target language (i.e., Chinese) in a beginning Chinese language classroom at a U.S. public university. A qualitative case study was used to document strategies the instructor used to maximize use of the Chinese language and to gain an in-depth understanding of how she implemented them. Data were collected through an online survey, 8 observations, and a semi-structured interview. The findings demonstrate that the instructor used visual aids, hand gestures, verbal repetition, predictable classroom routine, similar classroom activities, and follow-up questions to maximize use of Chinese in the classroom. The simplicity of Chinese grammar, particularly at the morphological structure level, played a positive role in the instructor's ability to maximize use of the Chinese language during classroom time.

**Keywords:** target language, comprehensible input, first language use, instructional language, classroom interaction

## 1. Introduction

Use of the target language (TL) has been a key topic in the study of foreign language teaching since the 1960s. For example, the contrastive hypothesis postulated that students' errors and confusion in the TL are directly influenced by transferring their first language (FL) structures to their TL (Ortega, 2009). Behaviorists asserted that second language acquisition is a process of replacing students' FL habits with those of the second language. The direct method was the first to explicitly urge teachers to use the TL exclusively in the classroom. Many researchers have suggested exclusive use of the TL in classroom. From their point of view, students' FL should not be used for any pedagogic purpose (Hall & Cook, 2012). However, recently, this belief has been questioned (Hall & Cook, 2012),

although instructors have been encouraged to maximize the use of the TL in classroom. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) advocated that the TL should be used as “exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time and, when feasible, beyond the classroom” (ACTFL, 2010, p. 1).

Maximizing use of the TL is important because it provides students with the necessary exposure to the language they are learning. It creates a communicative environment within which to learn and practice the language. Many studies have focused on the significance of the use of the TL, instructors’ and students’ beliefs regarding use of the TL, and instructors’ use of students’ FL in the classroom (e.g., Almoayidi, 2018; Al-Rifa’I, 2014; Alshammari, 2011; Hall & Cook, 2012; Khresheh, 2012; Mahmoudi & Amirkhiz, 2011; Moruana, 2009; Rodríguez Juárez & Oxbrow, 2008). However, research on the actual use of the TL in the classroom is lacking (Brevik & Rindal, 2020). Thus, an examination of how use of the TL can be maximized in the classroom, specifically, the strategies instructors use to engage students in the TL as much as possible during class time, is needed. In addition, Hall and Cook (2012) mentioned the need to explore maximizing the use of the TL for languages such as Chinese in “which their writing system and structure are significantly different” (p.272) from students’ FL.

The aim of the current study was to contribute to filling this gap in the literature by investigating the actual use of the TL in the classroom in a beginning Chinese language classroom. Very few studies have examined the use of the FL or the TL in beginning classrooms (e.g., Oguro, 2011; Zéphir & Marie-Magdelaine, 1993). This study examined the strategies employed by a trained Chinese language instructor to maximize the use of Chinese during classroom time. It aimed to address the following question: How, if at all, does a trained foreign language instructor maximize the use of the TL in a beginning classroom? The difficulty of learning Chinese and the popularity of English makes it convenient and easier for instructors and students to use English as a medium of teaching instruction in Chinese language classrooms (Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2012). Wang (2019) stated that research on the language used as a medium of instruction in Chinese language classrooms is lacking. Wang and Kirkpatrick (2012) found that English was used regularly and strategically as a medium of instruction in teaching Chinese as a second language in Beijing, even though the instructors endeavored to use only Chinese as a medium of instruction. The Chinese-only policy has not succeeded for teaching Chinese as a second or as a foreign language. The current study contributes to the literature by documenting how a trained Chinese language instructor maximizes use of the TL in a beginning Chinese language classroom.

## 2.Literature Review

Use of the FL and the TL has been a subject of great controversy in the foreign language teaching literature. Researchers' positions regarding how the FL and TL are best used in the classroom have radically changed over the last five decades. The dominating assumption from the 1960s until the late 1990s was that the TL should exclusively or near exclusively be the medium and the interaction language in the foreign language classroom. Instructors were required to ban the use of the FL or decrease its use to the minimum (Auerbach, 1993). According to these beliefs, conducting and teaching a foreign language entirely in the TL was a perfect indication of the successful language instructor (Cook, 2001; Eldridge, 1996).

The TL-only assumption was grounded in two major sources. The first is the theoretical perspective of Krashen's (1982) comprehensible input hypothesis that emphasizes that acquisition of a second or foreign language only occurs when the learners receive adequate TL input to trigger and activate second language acquisition mechanisms. Krashen went further by claiming that exposing students to the TL input is essential and sufficient for language acquisition to occur. Many researchers and instructors followed Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis and believed that the TL should be the only language used in any foreign language classroom. The second reason the TL-only assumption dominated was the failure of teaching grammar-based methods and approaches, such as the transition-grammar method, to promote the TL acquisition (Cook, 2001). The major aspect of these approaches was using students' FL to teach the TL. As a result, many researchers and educators were convinced that FL use in the foreign language classroom deprived the students of TL acquisition and should be abandoned or kept at a minimum (Dickson, 1996; Morris, 1999).

Although mainstream literature and policies advocated for the use of the TL in second and foreign language classrooms, empirical research has provided evidence that classroom practices related to using the TL do not always match theory and policy. Lucas and Katz (1994) stated "use of the target language appears so compelling that it emerges even when policies and assumptions mitigate against it" (p.558). Many factors need to be examined to understand how the TL is used and maximized in the classroom. Zéphir and Marie-Magdelaine (1993) conducted a study in beginning French as a foreign language class at Missouri State University in the United States to explore instructors' and students' attitudes toward the use of the TL. Instructors were required by program policy to exclusively use the TL in the classroom. Ten instructors who were native and non-native speakers of French and 300 students participated in this study. The researchers used questionnaires to collect data. The findings revealed that even though the instructors held positive attitudes regarding use of the TL, it was not used exclusively in the classrooms. The study indicated that 80% of students preferred the class to be taught in both the FL and the TL. This study provided important findings to show the gap between theory and

practice, but it is important to note that the instructors were teaching assistants and that using a questionnaire alone does not reflect what actually occurred in the classroom.

Polio and Duff (1994) contended that investigating the quality and the quantity of TL use in the foreign language classroom is crucial to understanding how its use contributes to language acquisition. They also mentioned that findings from some previous studies (e.g., Guthrie, 1987; Wing, 1987) reported low use of the TL in second and foreign language classrooms. Polio and Duff (1994) examined to what extent the TL was used in the classroom and for what purposes. They used a qualitative research method through which they observed 13 foreign language instruction classrooms involving 6 foreign languages (Chinese, German, Hebrew, Japanese, Korean, and Slavic) and interviewed the classroom instructors. All instructors were native speakers of the TL they taught. The findings showed that five of the six instructors used the TL in the classroom only minimally. The researchers explained that instructors understood "that using the TL as much as possible is important; however, they [the instructors] may not have figured out how to do so" (Polio & Duff, 1994, p. 324). These findings show the importance of equipping instructors with the necessary strategies to maximize TL use in the classroom, which is the aim of the current study. Harbord (1992) stated that instructors' lack of strategies to support their use of the TL and their fear that students will not understand what they are saying leads them to resort to using the students' FL.

Researchers have continued to examine various aspects of TL use in the classroom, such as instructors' and students' attitudes toward TL language use and the degree to which it is used in the classroom. However, since the middle of the 1990s, many researchers began investigating second and foreign language teaching from sociolinguistic and sociocultural theory perspectives. They emphasized that students' FL is beneficial and should be used in the classroom and highlighted the importance of considering the social context in and outside of the classroom. Dickson (1996) and Horwitz (1996) argued that postulating that students' FL should be avoided in the foreign language classroom to promote the target input has no scientific basis. From their points of view, there is no contradiction between maximal use of the TL and using students' FL for certain classroom purposes.

Izumi (1995) suggested that using students' FL is a suitable strategy for making the TL input comprehensible; therefore, it should be a natural part of the foreign language classroom discourse. Cook (2001) argued that learners' FL is a gate to learning the TL since it is already part of the learners' language skills and thought; therefore, it cannot be excluded. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) stated that learners' FL plays a positive cognitive role in learning the TL.

Moore (2013) argued that instructors' use of learners' FL makes them appear as incompetent users or like they are unable to communicate with learners in the TL. In addition, instructors feel guilty when they use learners' FL frequently (Huerta-Macias & Kephath, 2009). Pope (2016) stated that the exclusive use of the TL in the TL classroom consolidates learners' skills in using language. Advocates of using students' FL became mainstream in the middle of the 1990s and shifted the focus from examining how use of the TL can be maximized in the classroom to how the FL can be used in light of the near consensus that use of the TL should be maximized in the classroom. The division among researchers regarding the use of both languages in the classroom led each group to focus on defending its position by bringing evidence that use of the students' FL or TL was better for language acquisition. In addition, research regarding the use of students' FL versus using the TL in the foreign language classroom has not given much consideration to the differences between beginning learners versus intermediate and advanced classes.

Brevik and Rindal (2020) conducted a study to examine how the FL and the TL were used in seven Norwegian Grades 9 and 10 English as a Foreign Language classes. The goal of the study was to explore how students' FL (Norwegian) and the TL (English) were used in the classroom and to investigate students' perceptions of such use. The researchers observed and videotaped 60 lessons and surveyed 179 students. The study extended over two years, and the class levels varied. The findings demonstrated that instructors used the TL most of the class time (77%) across all classrooms. The researchers reported that students perceived the use of their FL as helpful. The study did not provide information about strategies instructors employed to maximize use of the TL in the classroom. Parks (2015) explored the experiences of two pre-service ESL teachers in maximizing use of the TL. The researcher utilized document analysis and interviews to gather data. The focus of the study was on sociocultural factors that contributed to the participants' efforts to maximize the use of the TL. The participants reported in the interviews that they used visual aids, hand gestures, miming, and the dictionary. As mentioned previously, the dominant mainstream research in recent years has advocated for the use of students' FL in the classroom. For this reason, many recent studies have concentrated on the use of students' FL or the use of both the FL and the TL in the classroom (e.g., Bucknam & Hood, 2020; de la Fuente & Goldenberg, 2020; Fichtner, 2005; He, 2012; Lee, 2012; Macaro et al., 2020; Molway et al., 2020; Narayan, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2016; Oga-Baladwin & Nakata, 2014). Studying the use of both languages gives a broad understanding of how the FL and the TL co-exist and serve foreign language acquisition. Yet, it is essential to conduct more studies that focus on how instructors maximize use of the TL in the classroom. The current study aimed to contribute to

filling the gap in the literature by examining how a trained foreign language instructor maximized use of the TL in a beginning Chinese language classroom.

### 3. Method

The aim of this qualitative case study was to address the following question: How, if at all, does, a trained foreign language instructor maximize use of the TL in a beginning Chinese classroom?

#### 3.1 Participant and Setting

The participant in this study was a 35-year-old native speaker of Chinese. She held a bachelor's degree in Chinese Language and Literature from a public university in China and a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction from a public university in the United States. She had joined a federal language teaching program in the United States called STARTALK, which was devoted to increasing the number of U.S. citizens who speak critical languages, such as Chinese, by training instructors to teach these languages. According to the instructor, she had attended several workshops in this program focusing on teaching language in communicative contexts and integrating culture into teaching. At the time of this study, the instructor had seven years of experience teaching Chinese as a foreign language and was the coordinator of the Chinese program at a U.S. public university. The university offered several languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, Greek, Japanese, French, German, Italian, Latin, Russian, and Spanish. The Chinese program at this university comprised six levels: Elementary I, Elementary II, Intermediate I, Intermediate II, Advanced I, and Advanced II. The program implemented the communicative language teaching approach as a principle teaching method. The beginning Chinese class level, which was the focus of this study, was four credit hours and met four times a week for fifty-minute sessions (Monday through Thursday before noon). Fourteen students were enrolled in this class.

#### 3.2 Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered through multiple means: an online survey, eight classroom observations, and a semi-structured interview at the end of the semester. I began by gathering background demographic information from the participant via Qualtrics Survey Software. The survey consisted of seven items designed to uncover the participant's biogeographical information, educational level, field of study, foreign language professional development experience, and years of language teaching experience. After the participant completed the survey, I conducted eight classroom observations over an eight-week period (one per week) to capture in detail how the instructor maximized use of the TL (i.e., Chinese). Each observation lasted 50 minutes. In my observations, I took the role of non-participant. This technique was chosen to minimize any distraction or influence on the instructor's teaching decisions and routines. Flick (2009) contended that the non-participant observation reduces the

influence of the researcher's interest on participants' behaviors. During the observation, I sat in a location apart from the students, but within a distance from which it was possible to view the instructor and the class. I wrote extensive field notes. After completing the observations, I conducted one semi-structured interview with the instructor to gain a deeper understanding of her thoughts about maximizing the use of the TL in the classroom and to aid in interpreting the classroom observations. Questions for this interview concentrated on decisions that the participant had made in the classroom to maximize the use of the TL in the classroom. I audio-recorded and transcribed the interview. Gathering the data took one academic semester.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was achieved through the constant comparative method whereby I inductively coded, categorized, and compared each set of data to reveal themes. I began the data analysis with a willingness to remain open (Charmaz, 2014), and I avoided making quick judgments regarding the participant's strategies to maximize use of the TL in the classroom. Analysis was an ongoing process that began while I was still collecting data and continued through the writing of this paper. Following each observation, I immediately read my field notes several times to gain a better understanding of what had happened in class and to become familiar with the data. I wrote analytic memos to capture my thoughts and impressions regarding the data. I attempted to identify methods and instructions that the instructor implemented to maximize use of the TL. The coding process was done through two stages initially and focused as described by Charmaz (2014).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Beliefs about Using the Target Language (TL)

The Chinese language instructor believed that the main focus of the beginning level of Chinese language class should be promoting students' speaking and listening skills and their ability to express themselves, as well as establishing the necessary linguistic foundations for success in higher class levels. She believed that listening and speaking are the most difficult Chinese language skills, especially since students do not have the opportunity to practice these skills outside the course. From her point of view, the instructor should create a rich classroom environment in which students can listen to and speak Chinese frequently. In addition, she believed that Chinese pronunciation is difficult and requires more attention and practice. The instructor shared that students sometimes struggled and may feel anxious because of the amount of Chinese used in class. She reported that it took students a while to become comfortable with learning in the TL. The Chinese language instructor emphasized the importance of accepting students' errors to encourage them to participate more in class. She shared that she avoided correcting their errors explicitly; rather, she

repeated the error in the accurate form. She said, "I want them to make mistakes, because I want them to speak." The instructor also believed that using visual aids and authentic materials is essential to enhancing students' comprehension ability. In addition, the language instructor believed that the instructor should maximize the use of the TL in class and minimize the use of students' native language. She mentioned that since students are learning in non-Chinese environment, they might have no opportunity to practice Chinese, except in class. For this reason, she emphasized the use of Chinese extensively in class.

#### 4.2 Using the Target Language (TL) in Class

In a typical Chinese class, students arrived a few minutes before class began and watched a video or a song in Chinese with English subtitles until the beginning of the session. The instructor began teaching by asking students individually about their week or weekend. The instructor and students spoke in Chinese. Sometimes students struggled because they did not understand the question or could not answer. The instructor usually spent approximately 10 minutes on this activity. Next, the instructor would present the weekly calendar in the Chinese language and point to the day of the class, the day before, and the day after while speaking in Chinese. Then she pointed to each day of the week, and students in some sessions repeated after her. These three activities (watching a clip in Chinese before the class, asking students about their week or weekend, and discussing the weekly calendar) were essential parts of class, which used up to 15 minutes of the class time.

Sometimes, the instructor began the class by discussing the weekly calendar without asking students about their week or weekend. After discussing the weekly calendar, the instructor would engage students in three to four activities. For each activity, she first would present the linguistic rule that she wanted to teach using pictures, video, or authentic materials (e.g., wall clock, purse, gloves) and then involve students in the activity. For example, in one session, I observed her teaching the words for family members. She used pictures of the former president of the United States, Barak Obama, and his family to teach the words "father," "mother," and "daughter" in Chinese. She spoke in Chinese while pointing to each family member, emphasizing the Chinese language words for "father," "mother," and "daughter" (父親, 母親, and 女兒). Then she presented another family member and repeated, pointing to each family member and sounding out the names for the words while students repeated after her. In another example, she used pictures of wall clocks to teach time. Each clock represented a specific time. She repeated the pronunciation of each time, and then asked students to repeat after her. After that, she depicted different times and asked students to tell her what the time was. Finally, she pronounced the time and asked students to write it on their small, white dry erase boards (approximately 11 x 14 in.). Thus, for each activity, the instructor first



presented the new linguistic rule while students watched and listened to her, partly engaged students in the activity, and finally, students practiced the rule. In other words, students first would repeat after the instructor, and then they would practice the rule.

The instructor used individual, pair, and whole group activities. She explained that she selected activities according to the topic being taught. When she was teaching students to speak the Chinese language, she divided students into pairs to recite dialogue in front of their classmates. Conversely, students completed listening activities individually. The instructor also taught students how to talk about hobbies. She asked one student to come in front of the class and face the other classmates. The students in their seats read a word such as music, football, or basketball from a PowerPoint slide on a screen behind the student standing in front of the class, and that student had to act out the word that the students had read from the slide. For example, if the word was football, the student would mimic the moves of a football player. The Chinese language instructor used Chinese as the language of instruction. She and her students spoke Chinese most of the class time. She shared that she used English only when students could not understand her. She stated that she used pictures as visual support tools to help students' comprehension of what she said. She also explained that she used activities and materials to make learning fun.

It is worth mentioning that unlike teaching grammar, vocabulary, and speaking, where the instructor spoke and communicated with students in Chinese, she used English to teach culture. Regarding providing students with feedback, the instructor used several feedback types: positive feedback, repetition, explicit correction, and speaking and writing rubrics. In providing positive feedback, she used words such as okay, good, and very good in Chinese when she accepted the student's performance. However, there was no indication to what extent the student's performance was acceptable. The instructor also used hand clapping to affirm students' performance. The second type of feedback used in class was repetition. She repeated what a student said with an emphasis on the correct form of the student's utterance. The instructor explained that she repeated students' pronunciation errors because she did not want to make students feel anxious—she wanted them to speak and feel comfortable while speaking. The third feedback type was explicit correction in which she overtly corrected the student's error. When using the explicit correction, the instructor sometimes wrote the correct form on the whiteboard.

## 5. Discussion

This study examined strategies used by a trained Chinese language instructor to maximize the use of the TL in a beginning Chinese language classroom with students whose FL was English. The instructor used the Chinese language as a medium of instruction, explaining linguistic rules and communicating with students in Chinese

during most of the class. The instructor managed to maximize the use of the Chinese language, despite the fact that the Chinese language has a completely different writing and sound system than English. (English has an alphabetic system, while Chinese is a symbolic language system.) The data collection methods and analysis demonstrated that the instructor's use of visual aids, hand gestures, verbal repetition, predictable classroom routine, similar classroom activities, and follow up questions played a significant positive role in her ability to maximize the use of the TL.

The simplicity of grammatical structure taught at this classroom level aided the instructor in explaining grammar in the TL. The instructor would explain grammar, show its use in sentences, and ask students to apply it in new sentences. Teaching pronunciation concerned the instructor, as she believed that Chinese pronunciation is difficult to teach. Chinese is a tonal language and pronouncing a syllable in a different tone changes the word meaning (Flaws, 2006). For example, the word "mā" with a high-level tone means "mother," "mà" with rising tone is a marker in a question, and "mǎ" with falling-rising tone means "horse" (Wang, 2010). The activities that the Chinese language instructor used did not focus on learning language rules; rather, they focused on increasing comprehension and students' use of Chinese for communicative purposes. For example, the instructor asked students at the beginning of each session about their weekend or week. She used a survey, where students asked their classmates about their family members and their birthdays. She also asked students to speak about different times of the day. These types of activities allowed students to use language for communicative purposes. However, these activities were limited to the sentence level. There is a need to expand the exchange of conversation above the level of uttering one sentence. Despite the use of open-ended questions that focused on communication, the class remained instructor-based, as the instructor dominated the classroom conversation. Students' use of Chinese was controlled, especially when she asked them at the beginning of the class about their weekend or week. Possibly, the instructor found it a challenge to enhance students' participation and interaction because this was an introductory language class. Students had just begun their journey in learning Chinese and did not have enough language proficiency to extend their participation and interaction in the classroom.

The findings show that using a predictable classroom routine where students easily anticipate and predict how the instructor explains and teaches concepts and what they will be asked to do facilitated their comprehension and allowed them to interact and focus on the new concepts they were learning. Changing the classroom routines and surprising students with new activities each class hinders the instructor's ability to use the TL to explain changes and new activities. Along with following a similar routine and similar activities, systematic verbal repetition, such as using the same words when giving commands, feedback, and homework, is important to make

students comprehend and, therefore, enhances the instructor's ability to maximize the TL.

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