



Bridging Cultures, Bridging Pedagogies East Meets West

Mei-Jean Kuo Barth and *Lori Langer de Ramirez* explain how foreign-born Chinese language teachers can find success teaching in American classrooms

With the growing popularity of Chinese language programs

across the country, many schools are facing new challenges in finding qualified Chinese teachers. In current years, Chinese teachers tend to come from the following sources:

- 1 Chinese-speaking teachers certified to teach in U.S. public schools;
- 2 Chinese-speaking non-certified teachers teaching in heritage (weekend) schools;
- 3 Chinese-speaking professionals with advanced degrees in other disciplines;
- 4 Foreign-born* Chinese language teachers applying for U.S. visiting teacher programs;
- 5 Non-heritage Chinese speakers at a range of different proficiency levels seeking to become Chinese language teachers.

Since there are relatively few teachers available that fall under the first category, many educators from the second, third, and fourth categories are hired to work in U.S. schools. Special challenges exist when teachers and students from different cultural backgrounds join together in the process of teaching and learning Chinese, so we need to ask how these foreign-born Chinese teachers can be supported in their transition from teachers of Chinese in China to teachers of Chinese in American mainstream classrooms.

This article strives to look deeper into this issue from the perspectives of an American administrator and a foreign-born Chinese teacher in order to examine how teacher preparation programs can design effective courses that enable teachers to survive — and ultimately thrive — in U.S. classrooms.

*Note: We use the term *foreign-born Chinese* to cover all those who come to the U.S. from China, Taiwan, and other areas of the world where Chinese-speakers reside.

The Chairperson's Experience

In my personal experience as Chair of ESL and World Languages for a small public school on Long Island, New York, I have been faced with the challenge of recruiting a qualified teacher of Chinese for our FLES program. We had been teaching French, Italian, and Spanish FLES for many years, and — after a community, parent, and student survey — settled on Mandarin Chinese as the language of choice to add to our program. When I needed to find good FLES teachers for the romance languages, I simply posted advertisements — both virtual and hard copy — on ListServs such as Nanduti and FLTeach and in local newspapers like the New York Times.

I also posted ads on language-specific websites such as the AATSP (American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese) site. I received a respectable number of resumes (never as many as my Social Studies or English colleagues!) and proceeded to screen and interview candidates. In a short amount of time, I had hired three of the best FLES teachers in the area and our program got off to a strong start.

When I started to look for a Chinese teacher, I followed the same model and posted ads to Nandu and FLTeach, as well as to the Chinese Language Teachers Association (CTLA) website (<http://clta.osu.edu/>). Unlike the response to the romance languages ad, the response to the request for Chinese teachers was swift and copious. Within minutes of the ad appearing on the CLTA website, I received several emails with attached cover letters, resumes — and even color photographs! — of potential candidates from mainland China. Within another few hours, I received several more from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and even the Midwest of the U.S., where several teachers were pursuing graduate work at universities or working in private schools. After a week of emails, I had over one hundred resumes. Unfortunately, not a single teacher was licensed to teach Chinese in the U.S.

Eventually, we were lucky enough to find a local teacher who was not only licensed by New York State to teach Chinese — but also dual licensed in art! We invited the candidate into our middle school for an interview by committee. She was hired and has been instrumental in developing the Chinese curriculum. She is teaching two classes of sixth graders this year.

Despite our success, many of my colleagues have not found teachers that are licensed and opt for hiring a Chinese teacher through the Office of Chinese Language Council International (otherwise known as HANBAN), or via some other international programs. Once my own school district's program grows (we are adding another two classes next year), I will be in the same boat and will need to start the hiring process all over again. I am cautiously optimistic that we will be able to find another fabulous Chinese teacher, especially given the recent development of licensing programs such as the World Languages Institute at Rutgers University in New Jersey (<http://wli.rutgers.edu>).

Whether our next hire comes from the existing pool of licensed Chinese teachers in the area, or we choose to invite a foreign-born teacher to work in our schools, there are many questions that face both the teacher and the administrator when starting a Chinese language program. Decisions like whether to teach traditional or simplified script, what textbooks are appropriate for beginning level students, and how much writing to incorporate into the first years of study are important issues that need to be addressed. These questions can only be answered satisfactorily through collaboration between the teacher and administrator. It is crucial for new Chinese teachers to feel confident in their relationship with their chairperson, director, or supervisor. Their voice is crucial in the decision-making process. A good staff development program supports the new teacher and reinforces the idea that their input is not only valuable, but also essential to the process of growing a strong Chinese program from the ground up.

