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Teaching in Primary School: Implementing the performative approach

Panel: Chinese language teaching in primary and secondary schools in Europe

This paper focuses on the presentation of a project conducted in two Primary Schools, having Irish as first language. The experimental group consists of a group of 65 learners attending the 5th and 6th classes (age 11/12). We are implementing a performative pedagogy (Schewe 2007), relying mainly on oral input, with a very reduced support of pinyin (to be conducted only in the last 20 hours of the project). At this stage, we will present the results of our first tests on tone acquisition and segmental accuracy (both in perception and production). The problem we are addressing is related to the issues involved in teaching Chinese to Irish English bilingual learners in the first stages of their literacy education, when they are decoding skills in two languages in parallel. “Despite its greater regularity, Irish spelling is sufficiently complex and distinct from English to challenge learners” (Stenson 2016) therefore, in such scenario, presenting pinyin transcription might increase the decoding difficulties. Moreover, in a context where the syllabus already includes one or two EU Second Languages, Chinese teaching must be presented as a ludic performative moment so as not to overburden pupils with a fourth language class. Despite this limitations, we are pursuing a measurable objective (HSK1) after 50 hours of training, where only the last 20 hours will be devoted to pinyin literacy and we intend to provide learners with rigorous basis for long term language acquisition. To this end, (i) a significant part of the curriculum is planned for helping students to become phonologically aware (becoming familiar with the segmental and supra segmental features so that they might grasp Chinese phonetic structure). (ii) Tones are presented accompanying the input with codified gestures, emphasizing each tonal contour, starting from the most basic tonal contrasts, as Low + High T3+T1, Falling + Rising T4+T1 (Cao 2000). This approach implies (iii) a multichannel pedagogy, based on the input+i model (Krashen 1982), always conducting in the target language and strongly relying on body language. (iv) The activities are planned so that students are not simply “understanding the input” by the teacher, but rather “enact” the language therefore producing immediately an output, according to the total physical response method (Asher 1977). In order to fill in the gap of written material, (v) the relevant content are presented also in the forms of memorized chunks, through songs and riddles including only the relevant lexicon and organized so as to let the learners notice the relevant syntactic structure. (vi) The introduction to the Chinese writing system is proposed under the form of task-based activities for reinforcing phonetic accuracy, where learners are invited to spell-out the strokes composing the most common radicals.