

Which Language?

Teaching a Bilingual Course for Overseas Students in China

Xiangchong Pan

Associate Professor, Shanghai Business School, Shanghai, China.

Email: panxchong123@163.com

Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Internationalization and Global Learning; International Students and Scholars Services; Language Education; University/Higher Education

Setting

A growing number of overseas students study at Chinese universities and colleges, majoring in Business Administration, Finance, Engineering, Healthcare, and so on. Take Shanghai Business School as an example, at present, there are 229 overseas undergraduates from differing parts of the world, and the number is expected to increase. In addition, almost every university or college in Shanghai has overseas students, which demonstrates that international education cannot be neglected in China. Although overseas students choose different professional fields, they typically take one common course: Chinese. Common reasons for learning Chinese are:

1. To know the unknown. For many, China is considered to be a mysterious and dynamic country with over 5000 years of history. They learn Chinese to appease their curiosities.
2. To travel in China. China is blessed with numerous stunning landscapes, such as the Yellow Mountain, Li River, The Great Wall, and so on. Knowing Chinese helps students to navigate their travels.

3. To seek a job opportunity. Thanks to rapid economic development and globalization, the job market has become more friendly for foreigners. Some students wish to pursue jobs in China or in partnership with Chinese organizations.
4. To gain professional knowledge and earn degrees. Depending on their major, Chinese language competency may be valuable in some students' future professions.
5. To study China. Some students have a personal interest in Chinese language and culture.

The case is set at ABC University in Shanghai. In September the English Teaching Department was assigned to teach Basic Chinese III for 30 overseas students majoring in Business Administration, Finance, and Hospitality Management. They are second-year students and have been in China for more than one year. The course objectives are to enlarge vocabulary; learn grammar; build speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills; and learn about Chinese culture

Case

The College of International Education was newly established at ABC university. Because the university prioritizes international education, they asked a reputable teacher with rich experience from the English Teaching Department to teach Basic Chinese III for overseas students. With 60 teaching hours, the course would run through one semester, lasting 15 weeks.

The teacher was told by the supervisor of College of International Education, who is in charge of teaching quality, that those overseas students had learnt Basic Chinese I & II for one year and had been in China for more than one year. In other words, their Chinese proficiency was medium or medium high. He was also told that he would teach Chinese and explain Chinese meaning to overseas students in English, and teach them how to use Chinese as well as introduce Chinese culture to them in English.

After having carefully prepared the course based on the instructions given by the supervisor and the textbook suggested by the supervisor, the teacher started the first lesson full of confidence. He spoke both English and Chinese fluently. He thought all his students spoke and understood English. He thought he could use English as the means to teach students Chinese. The first class went smoothly. Then, in the several minutes before class was over, the teacher gave students the assignments. The sample of assignments was shown below:

Make sentences with 一.....就..... (Note: 一.....就..... means as soon as)

1. to finish class / to go for a lunch
2. to take exams / to be nervous

Suddenly, some overseas students spoke loudly in English after the assignments were given: "Teacher, we didn't know the English words. How could we get those assignments done?" At that moment, the voice of the students surprised him a lot. The reality was quite different from what he had in his head. After personally talking to the students and surveying them, he found that English is not the first language for the majority of overseas students in his class. Only a few of them spoke and understood English well. He also found out that some of them could speak and read a little bit of Chinese, some of them could speak and read some Chinese, some of them could neither speak nor read Chinese, and none of them could write Chinese characters. He was bewildered by his findings, not knowing how to teach this bilingual course. Moreover, he was wondering whether he should still use English to help his students to understand Chinese. He reported to his supervisor about his findings and his puzzlement.

Discussion Questions:

As you consider this case imagine that you were the teacher or his supervisor, discuss:

- What kinds of teaching methods would you employ?
- How would you support a multi-national, multilingual class?
- How would you help the students learn from and build supportive relationships with each other?
- What responsibility does ABC University have to overseas students?
- What steps could the university have taken to prevent this case from happening?