Invigorating and Globalizing an Old Profession: CLC Keeps Up with the World’s Linguistic Trends

Dr. Wu Weiping, the new director of the Yale-in-China Chinese Language Centre (CLC), is a linguist with experience in Hong Kong, the US, and mainland China. A graduate of the Guangzhou Institute of Foreign Languages, he obtained his MA from Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou and his PhD in linguistics from Georgetown University in the US. Before coming to Hong Kong, he spent 10 years of his career conducting research at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC, and teaching at Georgetown. Dr. Wu served as assistant director of the CLC for two years, working closely with Prof. John Jamieson, former director of the centre, before being chosen to be the centre’s new director through an international search.

Modernization for CLC means curricular adjustments. Currently the CLC runs a two-year programme for international students of the University, which includes various aspects of the Chinese language. In the coming three years, the programme will be modularized in stages to ensure it meets proficiency needs and to allow for greater flexibility. When the new system is in place, there will ideally be module combinations catering equally well to the language usage needs of students of one semester as to those of six (CLC has three semesters per year). Students with the time and interest can also gain exposure to knowledge of the Chinese language, but they will be evaluated mainly on how they use the language, or, to borrow Dr. Wu’s metaphor, on the house they build, not on the building materials.

Curriculum modularization calls for a matching set of teaching materials, which is a huge undertaking as the centre’s teaching materials are designed for the whole approach system. Dr. Wu’s ideal scenario is to prepare materials with the help of IT, which is to have lessons stored in a computer database under different themes. Instructors can simply pull out lessons under the desired themes according to the needs of their students and put them together as loose leaves. ‘While the centre is heading towards that direction, it is a long process that requires the joint efforts of all of its teaching staff,’ Dr. Wu said.

Standardizing Language Testing

One cannot talk about language teaching without language testing. This happens to be a research specialty of Dr. Wu who also serves as the Chief Examiner (Putonghua Speaking Paper) for the Language Benchmark Assessment for secondary school language teachers of the Hong Kong Examinations Authority. The current practice at the CLC involves having students tested individually by two teachers. Given the large number of students (close to 3,000 local students at the University and about 1,000 international students each year), the CLC has quite a lot on its plate. Besides, these oral assessments are not standardized. Hence an ‘A’ from the CLC might not be equivalent to an ‘A’ from a corresponding unit at UCLA or Pudan University.

Dr. Wu’s solution to these problems is COPA (Computerized Oral Proficiency Assessment), an adaptation of the Chinese Speaking Test (CST) developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC. The examinee hears the test directions and questions in their mother tongue from the computer and responds in either Cantonese or putonghua. Their responses are recorded and stored in the computer, to be evaluated by two specially trained COPA raters. Funded by the US Department of Education, the CST was a project that Dr. Wu undertook for almost a decade while working at the Center for Applied Linguistics. COPA is a step forward for the CST in using IT in language testing, and is designed to cater to the special needs of language learners in Hong Kong. If all goes according to schedule, students admitted to the University in 2003 will be able to assess their own oral proficiency using COPA, with a standardized rating scale that is recognized by many institutions worldwide and that can be easily understood.

Staff Restructuring and Training

The structure of the teaching staff also needs to be recognized to tie in with CLC’s modernization. Efforts to this end have already begun and will continue.

‘The aim of restructuring is to keep a reasonable ratio between full-time and part-time instructors and between senior and junior teaching staff,’ Dr. Wu pointed out. To help staff meet the needs of internationalization, the centre has been running an in-service training programme. This includes inviting experts in language-teaching methodology to give talks and seminars to discuss the work of language teachers and the difficulties involved, and workshops covering topics such as language assessment and materials preparation. Meantime, new part-time instructors have also received training with the aim of making them more versatile.

‘Some instructors are good with international students, some with local students, and others with students of the special service programmes we run at the request of faculties or departments. We hope to train them to be more all-rounded so that they feel more comfortable teaching different types of students,’ said Dr. Wu.

More Efforts at Internationalization

The centre’s other efforts to increase internationalization includes collaboration with the Office of Academic Links (OAL) to recruit more international students. Currently the centre’s international students fall into two categories: exchange students at CUHK and direct applicants, some of whom are recommended by agencies. The centre enjoys connections with three or four agencies from Japan and South Korea. Dr. Wu hopes to establish a working relationship with more agencies from more parts of the world. He will also use his links in the US to contact universities directly to promote the centre’s programmes. Having a more flexible and practical new curriculum will definitely give the centre a push in the right directions, with some help, Dr. Wu hopes, from the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Other Programmes Continue Unabated

Reforms aside, the centre will continue to teach putonghua to local students of the University and Cantonese and putonghua to CUHK staff and their spouses. And since 1999, it has been teaching Cantonese to students recruited from the mainland. It will continue to offer tailor-made courses, such as in-service language training for professionals in law, finance, and management, and in-service courses for civil servants and employees of Hong Kong-based foreign companies.

One challenge faced by the centre is increasing competition from the mainland in putonghua-teaching. Programmes offered by mainland institutions are cheaper due to lower teaching costs. However, the centre enjoys an edge in the instruction of Cantonese, which has, since 1997, gained popularity among non-Chinese speakers.

One of the largest institutions of its kind in the world, the CLC is also one of the oldest in Hong Kong, and has stood the test of time. With the improvements brought about by internationalization and modernization, it will be in a better position to help the University play a more active role internationally and to contribute its bit to global culture in the 21st century.

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