Language takes on Chinese flavour

Putonghua is set to rival English as the foreign language to learn, language centre director tells Raymond Zhou

If you walk into a large bookstore in any major mainland city, you'll be amazed by the number and variety of titles that teach English to Chinese speakers. Some are multi-volume tomes that may take years to digest, while others proclaim to impart this language skill in a pain-free manner, like the books that assure students they'll be able to write essays in English in 42 days.

While some of these claims are dubious, to say the least, one thing that cannot be doubted is that, on the mainland nowadays, teaching English is big business.

In fact, it is a large industry. According to the number of non-native speakers involved, says Yong Ping, director of New Asia Yale-in-China Chinese Language Center of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Learners of English are generally referred to as students of ESL, or English as a Second Language. A group of language learners that grows every year and can be found in countries across the globe, they are avidly pursued by operators in the language market.

According to a British Council survey, the worldwide English-speaking population is over 7 billion, and that includes both native and non-native speakers.

On the mainland alone, all of its urban populations can be categorized as ESL learners to some degree, and the numbers are growing at an exponential rate due to the spread of ESL programs in schools in the country.

But a parallel industry of CSL, or Chinese as a Second Language, is also emerging, says Wu. "We refer to ESL as a "foreign" language that has been around for more than half a century and CSL as a "host" language, compared to its grown-up counterpart. The number of non-Chinese speakers of English.

"Now if we imagine the same scenario happening with the Chinese language, which has more than 1 billion native speakers," says Wu, "we can see what the future for CSL might be like. With the advent of the "Chinese Century" and the Beijing Olympics in 2008, it is most likely that this "robust little fellow" is going to grow up much faster than most people expect.

There are many signs that this is already happening. In recent years, waves of people have been flooding into the mainland to get "up close and personal" with the language, and we are seeing an increasing number of students who are pursuing a Putonghua speaking environment. Almost every university in Beijing has a CSL programme for foreign students, and Jinan University in Guangzhou has more overseas students this year than it has local students.

The Chinese Language Center that Wu helms may be small by comparison, but it is the largest in Beijing, with as many as 800 students from all over the world enrolling every year for the primary purpose of language learning. By 2005, close to 10,000 foreign students had completed study at the center and the alumni includes top government officials in HKSAR, key players in diplomatic circles and presidents of chambers of commerce.

In other countries, CSL is popping up on many campuses. Examples of Chinese language learning gaining popularity overseas abound. In the US, some high schools used to consider "Chinese" as a "foreign" language, it is ideal for a speaker of one language to dip his feet in the waters of the other. However, there are complications as well. Wu found out when he first arrived in the US.

"CSL (Chinese as a Second Language) will quickly become as large an industry (as ESL) due to the enormous number of native speakers and the increasing interest in the language from non-Chinese people around the world. After all, nobody can brush aside a language if one out of every five people in the world uses it in their daily life," he says.

Wu is referring to ESL, as a "giant" compared to its grown-up cousin. The number of non-Chinese speakers of English.

"A shift in focus in language learning invariably leads to changes in testing," says Wu, who has also been serving as a testing specialist for many projects in the US and Hong Kong. He believes that such changes are part of a language having a "life of its own."

His language tests are designed are either pushed aside or simply forgotten. Horror stories abound of Chinese students who, armed with perfect TOEFL scores, can still barely comprehend what is being taught or discussed in a typical American college classroom. Likewise, a high score in HSK or CDF does not mean competency can be resolved by creating better tests. Wu also believes that there is a tendency for people to blame the tests without realizing that the system is the problem.

Any significant changes to the testing methods, he adds, must be accompanied by a suitable

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up cousin. The number of non-native speakers of English, thanks to the ESL industry, has caught up and surpassed the number of native speakers, which is around 375 million.

Wu found out when he first arrived and discovered that in Hong Kong, “Chinese” actually means Cantonese, whereas the Chinese language that CSL refers to is Putonghua.

Wu states that there has been a major shift in the focus of ESL and CSL from “knowledge” to “ability.”

A student, says Wu, absorbs different kinds of knowledge from day one of his schooling. University courses are all about knowledge, he says.

“A language learner, be it in ESL or CSL, needs to learn the sound (phonology), meaning (semantics and pragmatics) and rules (grammar) of the language which is ‘knowledge’, during most of his time at the school.”

“The ‘ability’, on the other hand, is the application of that knowledge in real life,” says Wu. Linguists tend to regard “knowledge” as linguistic competence and “ability” as being performance. Although many educators have come to realize that a language test should also measure performance rather than just take stock of a student’s knowledge of a language, the programme that he leads at CUHK is “perhaps the only one in Hong Kong that issues a certificate with descriptions of the learner’s ability to use the language in life,” he says.

This distinction is important because some students achieve good results because of their absorption of the fundamentals of the language, but are deficient in its application. Wu states that some students are able to memorize thousands of words of a language, and all of its grammatical rules, but are at a loss when it comes to actually speaking or writing in this language.

Fortunately, he says, language teaching, unlike fashion trends, which can be cyclical, has a tendency to evolve and develop. Teachers nowadays motivate students in a student-centred learning environment, rather than just impart knowledge or analyze the complexities of it.

“It is no longer a teacher-dominated classroom. Student attention is drawn to not only what a word means, but how, when and where it should be used.”

His language tests are designed for various purposes, such as college entrance examinations or for promotion or graduation in particular courses.

TOEFL, or Test of English as a Foreign Language, which has been the leading English language proficiency test for the past 40 years, attracts 600,000 individuals worldwide each year. Textbooks and related products make it an industry worth billions of US dollars a year.

In the CSL market, Han Yu Shuangjia Kaoshi (HEK) and the Putonghua Shuangjia Ceshi (PSC) are growing in popularity.

However, Wu warns, no matter how well a test is designed or publicized, once it comes into widespread use, it can take on “a life of its own” or even become a “black hole” that teachers and students blindly follow.

“If everyone is teaching and learning in order to pass the test, the essentials in language learning high score in HEK or PSC does not necessarily prove that the CSL learner will be able to communicate well in Putonghua.

With the rise of certain tests that have begun to dictate the scope of ESL and CSL learning, is there a way to avoid the danger of widely used tests that are potentially ineffective?

It seems highly unlikely, says Wu, but says that while it may be difficult to change the strong influence the testing system has, problems with

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Wu is Director of the New Asia College Chinese Language Center of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

A teaching specialist and researcher, Wu oversees the teaching department and its 50-member staff.

Wu's professional experience includes teaching at various universities in the mainland and in the US and Hong Kong, where he conducts teacher training workshops and academic research in cross-cultural communication.