

Teaching Chinese Literacy in the Early Years: A Comparison of L1 and L2 Preschool Classrooms in Shenzhen and Singapore

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the similarities and differences in early Chinese literacy pedagogies between L1 Shenzhen and L2 Singapore preschools. Twelve classes were observed for a total of 180 hours, and the 12 Chinese teachers were surveyed and interviewed about the beliefs underpinning their teaching of literacy. A similar pattern of Chinese literacy pedagogy was shared by L1 and L2 classrooms, with whole class direct instruction/interaction being the dominant mode. A belief-practice gap was found: Although the teachers believed in balanced approaches to teaching Chinese literacy, they predominantly engaged in traditional, instructional practice. In L2 Singapore classrooms, traditional Chinese literacy pedagogies were tempered by more Western ideas. The common difficulties encountered in L1 literacy classrooms were different from those found in L2 classrooms, and most of the L1 and L2 difficulties were associated with the language and education policies. The sociocontextual, psycholinguistic and pedagogical accounts and the educational implications of these findings are also discussed.

Keywords : teaching Chinese literacy, early years

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Teaching English as the second language (L2) has been widely studied, whereas teaching Chinese as L2 has been rarely explored. More recently, the appropriateness and effectiveness of importing “Western” pedagogies to the teaching of English as L2 in China has become a topical issue (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Sampson, 1984; Ting, 1987). Although the value of importing Western pedagogies in China is appreciated, most researchers have focused on the need to adapt (rather than adopt) Western practices to match with Chinese traditional pedagogies (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012). In this paper, Western pedagogies refer to those methods developed and used widely in Western countries (relative to China and Asia) that prefer a child-centered approach, integrated teaching, inquiry-based learning and learning through play, small-class or group learning, child-initiated and process-oriented activities. Traditional Chinese pedagogy, however, features a teacher-directed approach, direct instruction and subject teaching, content-based learning and learning through exercising, whole-class teaching, achievement-oriented and teacher-directed activities (Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012).

Recently, Li, Wang, and Wong (2011) found that adopting Western pedagogies to teach Chinese literacy as L1 in China might not be culturally appropriate, because there were strong resistances from teachers and parents in the prevailing education system. Similarly, importing traditional L1 Chinese pedagogies into teaching Chinese as L2 in other countries (e.g., Singapore, Korea, Indonesia, North America) may also be culturally problematic. But little is known about the differences between L1 and L2 early Chinese literacy classes, and currently, very few studies have empirically addressed these questions. As part of a larger comparative study of preschools and primary schools in Hong Kong, China and Singapore (Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012), this study is therefore dedicated to the understanding of how traditional Chinese and Western pedagogies interact with one another in L1 and L2 China and Singapore preschools. First, we introduce the background on underlying conditions and traditions concerning Chinese literacy education in both China and Singapore to understand why they are comparable for this study.

Teaching Chinese Literacy as L1 in China and L2 in Singapore

Chinese is L1 to most of the preschoolers in China but teaching and assessing Chinese

literacy in preschools has been prohibited since 1952 (Li & Rao, 2000). Since the 1980s, integrated teaching approach has been promoted and become the mainstream approach in the Chinese early childhood classroom (Li & Rao, 2005). New regulations on kindergarten education have reinforced the notion of an integrated curriculum, advocated play-based learning, and denounced the explicit teaching of academic skills (China Preschool Education Research Society, 1999). Most of these regulations, however, remain rooted in Western views of early pedagogy, and thus are not consistent with traditional Chinese beliefs about early learning. For example, rote learning and reciting activities have been long regarded as effective learning approaches for early Chinese literacy. But the scholars and policy makers in China and Singapore believe these literacy instructional approaches (direct instruction) are against the Western pedagogies and could not coexist in kindergartens. However, the Chinese parents do believe that preschoolers could and should learn the reading and writing of Chinese with these traditional literacy instructional approaches (Li & Rao, 2000; Li et al., 2011). These inconsistencies among policies, beliefs and practices have presented early childhood educators with a dilemma (Wang & Mao, 1996). Hence, an updated version of the “Guidance for kindergarten education” was issued by the Ministry of Education (GOC, 2001) to bridge the gap between Western ideas and Chinese traditional practices in kindergartens.

In practice, however, many kindergartens have willingly tested different approaches to the teaching of Chinese literacy, participating in experiments, pilot studies, and school readiness training (Li & Rao, 2000, 2005). Accordingly, many studies have been conducted to understand the contributing factors for early Chinese literacy development. Researchers have found that parental involvement (Li & Rao, 2000), teachers’ qualifications and classroom experience (Li & Rao, 2005), and formal literacy activities (Li, Corrie, & Wong, 2008) all significantly contribute to literacy attainment in Chinese children. A remarkable belief-practice gap, however, was also found in teaching Chinese literacy (Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011). Most of the Western pedagogies mentioned by the teachers in their self-reported beliefs had not been implemented in actual teaching practice. The traditional Chinese model, with the teacher directing the whole-class session, still dominated (Li & Rao, 2005; Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011).

In Singapore, Chinese is now a second language (L2) to the Chinese children as they learn English (L1) first and speak it at home and in school (Li & Rao, 2000, 2005). English has

become the national language, and no guidelines about early Chinese literacy education were developed until 2003 (Ng, 2011). Before the creation of the guidelines, it was up to kindergarten principals and teachers about when and how to do early Chinese literacy. Without enough qualified Chinese teachers in town, however, Singapore kindergartens had to “import” a great deal of Chinese teachers from Mainland China. These imported teachers were trained in China as L1 teachers, and have brought Chinese traditional pedagogies, such as direct teaching of Chinese literacy, into Singapore. Therefore, this study will examine how teachers’ L1 pedagogies interact with Western pedagogies in the L2 classrooms in Singapore.

Pedagogical Reforms in China and Singapore

Since 1990s, China has launched a top-down movement to transform the teacher-directed learning paradigm into a child-centred and holistic paradigm (Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011). The governmental reform proposal has recommended a shift from an instructivist to a constructivist approach in teaching and learning (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). In 2005, Singapore government launched the guidelines on preschool English and Chinese curricula, establishing the six “iTeach” principles for early childhood education: a) integrated learning, b) teachers as supporters of learning, c) engaging children in learning through play, d) ample opportunities for interaction, e) children as active learners, and f) holistic development (Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012). New concepts, such as inquiry-based learning, child-centeredness, developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), emergent literacy and whole language, have been broadly promoted by teacher educators and policymakers in both China and Singapore (Li & Rao, 2005; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). But the transplanting of these borrowed Western pedagogies was found unsuccessful in China (Liu & Feng, 2005; Li, et al., 2011) and problematic in Singapore (Ng, 2011). For instance, Zhu and Zhang (2008) found that Chinese teachers still used the traditional methods to teach, even though teachers could discuss the new ‘Western’ thinking about language learning. And Ang (2008) found that Singapore teachers also had some reservations about importing Western pedagogies because they really concerned about the limited funding and resources, the lack of teacher training, and the high parental expectations.

This dissonance between Chinese teachers’ stated Western pedagogical beliefs and their

use of traditionally endorsed Chinese practices (Liu & Feng, 2005) has urged the researchers to reflect on the appropriateness of importing Western approaches to Chinese literacy teachings (Hu, 2002; Li, 2007; Ng, 2011; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Our previous study (Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011) compared the authentic teaching practices in Mainland China with a large scale systematic observation of early childhood classrooms and found significant policy-practice and belief-practice gaps. Most of the curriculum reform ideas were expressed by the teachers in their self-reported beliefs but had not been implemented in their teaching practice. The influences from Chinese culture, language, teachers, parents, resources available and the prevailing education system could jointly account for these gaps in China. These findings indicate that exporting Chinese teachers (and their pedagogies) to teach Chinese as L2 in Singapore might be problematic. There might be some noticeable differences between L1 classrooms in China and L2 classrooms in Singapore thus the teachers might have encountered some unexpected difficulties. This study will investigate whether the belief-practice gap found in L1 early childhood classrooms in China is also evident in L2 classrooms in Singapore. In particular, the following questions guided this study:

1. How is Chinese literacy taught in L1 and L2 early childhood classrooms?
2. What are the similarities and differences in teaching Chinese literacy as L1 and L2 between the two contexts?
3. Are there any gaps between Chinese teachers' declared beliefs and the early Chinese literacy teaching practices?

Methodology

Sample

Choice of cities. Li and colleagues have conducted a series of studies on early literacy development and education in Beijing, Hong Kong and Singapore (Li & Rao, 2000, 2005; Li, Corrie, & Wong, 2008; Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011). The present study is part of a larger project which has chosen Shenzhen, Hong Kong and Singapore as the research sites to achieve a satisfactory balance of societal representativeness, cultural appropriateness, and

contextual variation (Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012). Shenzhen is one of the most developed cities in Mainland China and the only monolingual society, with Putonghua as the lingua franca, in southern China (Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011). Shenzhen and Hong Kong are the only match in China of the most geographical and economical similarities while being under different sociolinguistic and educational systems. But Hong Kong's educational approach has been significantly influenced by its British colonial heritage. Singapore, another former British colony, is a multilingual society with Chinese as one of the official languages; ethnic Chinese make up about 80% of the population (Li & Rao, 2000). These three cities have markedly different curriculum guidelines on the teaching of Chinese literacy, and the status of Chinese language are very different (Li & Rao, 2005). Chinese is taught as L1 in Shenzhen and Hong Kong, whereas it is taught as L2 in Singapore. This study just compared Shenzhen and Singapore because most of Singapore kindergartens imported Chinese teachers from Shenzhen and other cities in Mainland China. Comparing these two cities will help to understand how Chinese literacy is taught as L1 and L2 and how Chinese traditional pedagogies and Western pedagogies interact with each other in L1 and L2 classrooms.

Selection of classes. Stratified random sampling was conducted to recruit three kindergartens catering to middle-class families located in three representative communities in Shenzhen (*Futian, Luohu, and Nanshan*) and Singapore (*Tampines, Jurang West, and Woodlands*). One kindergarten class of 4-year-olds (K2) and one class of 5-year-olds (K3) were randomly selected from each participating kindergarten, so that 6 classes were selected in each society, resulting in a sample of 12 classes.

Participants. The 12 Chinese teachers of the participating classes were interviewed individually and their teaching practice observed and video recorded for a consecutive week, the focus being on literacy teaching and teacher-child interactions. The Shenzhen and Singapore teachers had attained 15-year and 13-year educational experience, respectively, reflecting societal differences in teacher qualifications between the two regions (Li & Rao, 2000, 2005). Noticeable difference was found in the years of teaching experience among the teachers from Shenzhen (range: 1-15 years; $M = 7.5$, $SD = 5.5$) and Singapore (range: 1-15 years; $M = 9.5$, $SD = 4.7$). This comparison implies that the Shenzhen teachers were more

educated but less experienced than their counterparts in Singapore.

Measures

Videotaped classroom observations. Classroom observations were conducted in the two cities for one week during the first semester in the participating classes. Each classroom was observed for a maximum of 3 hours over the course of the observation day, beginning at the start of the school day, with an intention of observing the instruction time. The entire observation lasted approximately 15 hours for each class, resulting in a total of 180 observation hours, divided evenly between the K2 (four-year-olds class) and K3 (five-year-olds class) classrooms. The data analyses, however, focused on the Chinese teaching and learning activities.

Questionnaires. All the participating teachers completed the *Classroom Literacy Environment Index* (CLEI) (Li & Rao, 2005; Li, Corrie, & Wong, 2008) to report their beliefs and practices about Chinese literacy pedagogies. The CLEI consists of 27 questions that tap into teacher beliefs and practices about Chinese reading, classroom literacy activities, classroom reading resources, and reading strategies (For details, See Li, Corrie, & Wong, 2008). Each item is rated on a 5-point scale. It has been developed and modified for research in Beijing, Hong Kong and Singapore (Li & Rao, 2005; Li, Corrie, & Wong, 2008). Teachers completed the questionnaire after each videotaped lesson to collect more information on their lesson planning and to identify atypical events during videotaping.

Interviews. All the Chinese teachers were interviewed, in individual sessions, after the videotaping in their classes was completed. Semi-structured interviews were developed by using participant responses to questionnaire items and the observational reports as prompts to elicit their thinking. The interview data served as a means to understand the relationship between teachers' thinking and their classroom practices.

Data Management

Observational data. Observational videotapes were transcribed and analysed, using a coding scheme that was appropriate for Chinese literacy classroom observation (Liu, Kotov, Rahim, & Goh, 2005; Wu, Li, & Anderson, 1999). The coding scheme is a comprehensive framework, allowing researchers to analyse and understand the pedagogical practice in both preschool and primary school classrooms (For details, see Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012). This coding system has been found very reliable and useful in our previous studies (Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011; Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012). The two research assistants responsible for data coding coded 10% of the video data using the coding system, and the inter-observer agreement was 94%, indicating a satisfactory inter-rater reliability. They coded the remaining video data using the *Observer XT* (www.noldus.com) to note the time duration and occurring frequency of classroom activities (e.g., social organization, teaching strategies, teacher's talk, and teacher-students interactions). And the author of this paper analysed the data with SPSS 16.

Survey and interview data. All the completed questionnaires were collected, entered and analysed with SPSS 16. The recorded interviews were transcribed by the same two research assistants and analysed by the researcher. In view of the lack of theoretical concepts and empirical data in this area, an inductive approach towards data analysis was employed. The qualitative approach to data analysis was adapted mainly from the Attride-Stirling's thematic model (2001), while also referencing Strauss and Corbin's methods for open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). *NVivo 8* (<http://www.qsrinternational.com>) was used for data coding. Codes were applied to the text to dissect it into segments. The categories and themes emerged from the data sets of interview transcripts were further analysed by the researcher with reference to CLEI.

Results

Analyses of the 180 hours of observational data found remarkable similarities and some minor discrepancies in preschool Chinese classrooms between Shenzhen (SZ) and Singapore

(SG). As shown in Figure 1 (a-f), no significant societal differences in the type of Chinese literacy pedagogies were found between these L1 and L2 classrooms. This section presents the results generated from the observation, survey, and interview data, respectively.

Observational Data: Chinese Literacy Teaching Practice

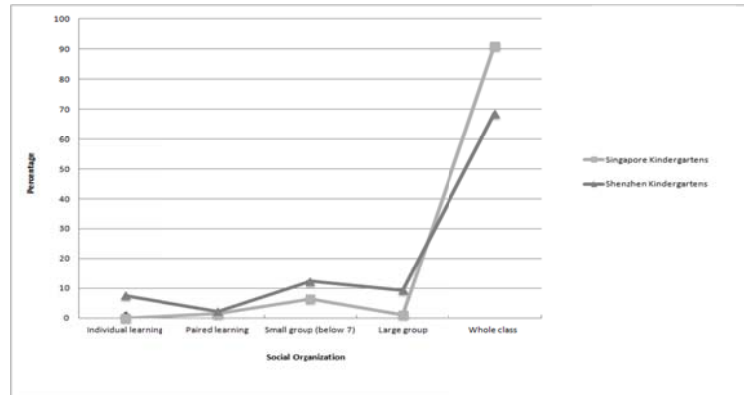
Social organization. Five types of social organization were coded and analysed in this domain: a) individual learning, b) paired learning, c) small group (3-7 members) learning, d) large group (8-15 members) learning, and e) whole class learning. It was found that whole class learning was the prevailing mode in SG(91.1%) and SZ (68.6%) (see Figure 1a). Small group learning mode was also observed in SG (6.4%) and SZ (12.4%). No individual learning was observed in L2 SG but some (7.6%) was found in L1 SZ.

Teaching behaviour. Five types of teaching behaviour were coded and analysed in this domain: a) caring, b) managing, c) questioning, d) lecturing, and e) playing. Among them, questioning (43.9%) and lecturing (38.4%) were frequently observed in SGL2 classrooms. Questioning (35.5%), managing (34.3%), and lecturing (28%) were found to be the top three teaching behaviours in SZ L1 classrooms. Caring and playing were the least used in SG(0.2%; 0.7%) and SZ (0; 2.2%) classes.

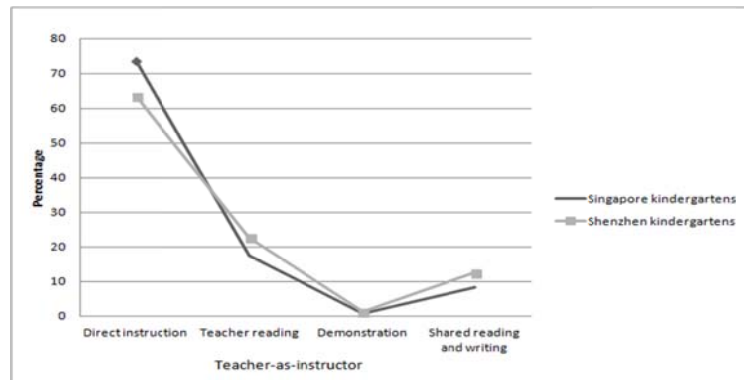
Teacher-as-instructor. Four types of teaching strategy were coded and analysed in this domain: a) Direct instruction, b) teacher reading, c) demonstration, and d) shared reading and writing. Direct instruction was found to be the dominating strategy both in L1 SZ (63.5%) and L2 SG (73.5%) classrooms (See Figure 1b). Teacher reading was the second commonly used one in SZ (22.7%) and SG (17.6%). Shared reading and writing was also used in SZ (12.6%) and SG (8.2%).

Feedback. Three types of feedback were defined: a) positive, b) neutral, and c) negative. Interestingly, neutral feedback was the most frequently used in both SZ (55.9%) and SG (79.3%). Positive feedback was also frequently used in SZ (42.6%) and SG(19.9%). Negative feedback was almost not used in both cities (1.5% for SZ, 0.8% for SG).

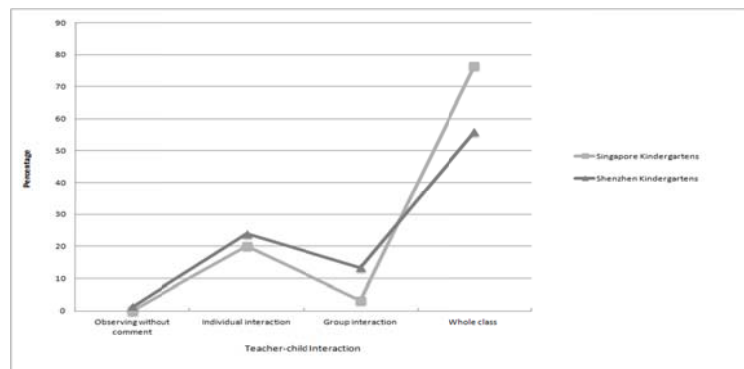
(a)



(b)

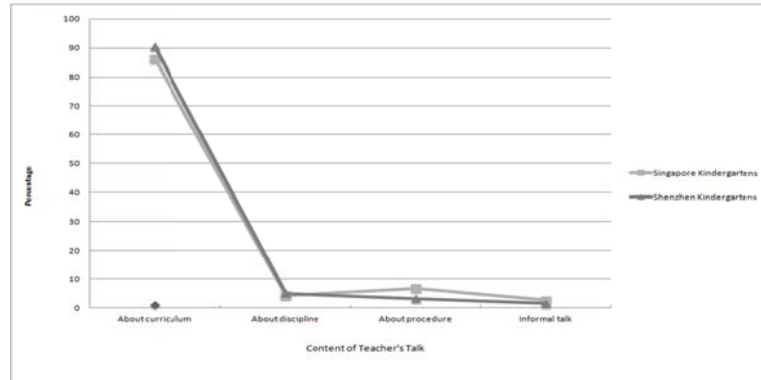


(c)

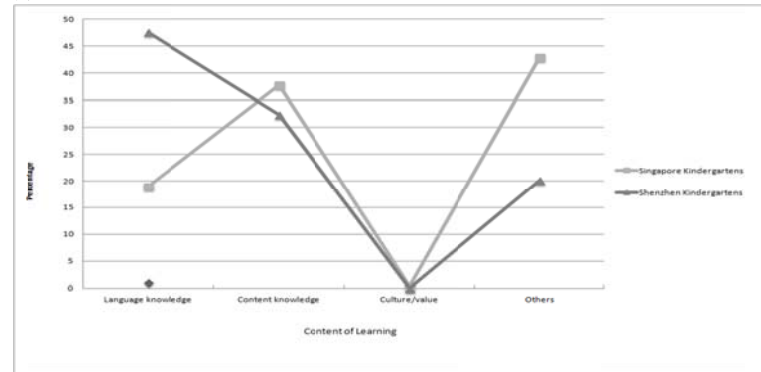


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(d)



(e)



(f)

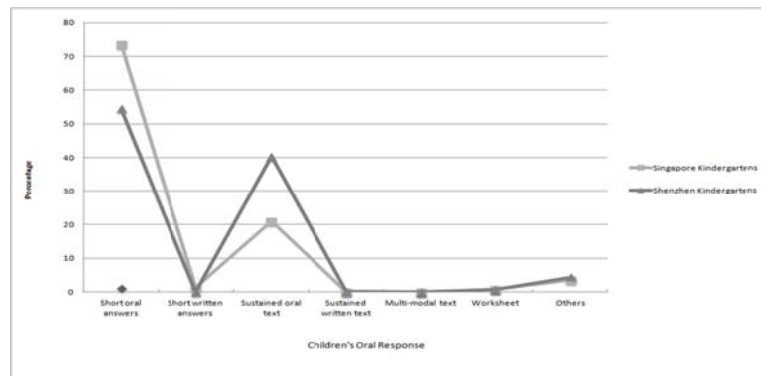


Figure 1. A Comparison of Preschool Classrooms among Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Singapore in Social Organisation (a), Teaching Behaviour (b), Teacher-student Interaction (c), Teacher's Talk Time (d), Content of Learning (e), and Children's Oral Response (f).

Teacher-student interaction. Four types of interaction were coded: a) observing without action, b) individual interaction, c) group interaction, and d) whole-class interaction. Whole-class interaction was found to be the most frequently used mode both in SZ (55.9%) and SG (76.4%) (see Figure 1c). Individual interaction was also frequently used in SZ (23.9%) and SG (20.2%). Group interaction was little used in SG (3.3%), whereas it was used more often in SZ (13.4%). There was almost no observation of the observing without action mode in SZ (1.3%) and SG (0.1%).

Teacher's talk. The content of teacher's talk was analysed and coded into four types: a) about curriculum, b) about discipline, c) about procedure, and d) informal talk. The same pattern was found in both SZ and SG classrooms: The majority of teacher's talk was about curriculum (SZ: 90.4%; SG: 86.3%); very little talk was about discipline (SZ: 4.9%; SG: 4.3%) and procedure (SZ: 3.2%; SG: 6.7%), and informal talk (SZ: 1.5%; SG: 2.6%) (see Figure 1d).

Content of teaching. The teaching content was analysed and coded into four types: a) language knowledge, b) content knowledge, c) culture/value, and d) others. It was found that in SG classrooms, most instruction was on Others (42.9%) (include theme-related and subject knowledge), content knowledge (37.8%), and language knowledge (18.9%) (see Figure 1e). In Shenzhen, language knowledge (47.5%), content knowledge (32.4%) and others (20.1%) were the foci of instruction. Almost no focus was put on the culture/value both in SZ (0) and SG (0.3%) (Figure 1e).

Student resistance. Three types of resistance were defined and coded: a) disruptive behaviour, b) passive resistance, and c) open resistance. None of these types were found in SZ classrooms; whereas disruptive behaviour was found twice and passive resistance four times in SG L2 classrooms.

Student's products. In this study, student's products were coded into seven types: a) short oral answers, b) short written answers, c) sustained oral text, d) sustained written text, e) multimodal text, f) worksheet, and g) other responses. Short oral answers were the most

frequently observed student's product in SZ (54.5%) and SG (73.5%). Sustained oral text was also frequently observed in SZ (40.3%) and SG (21%). The other products were barely or not even observed in the study (see Figure 1f).

Teaching aids. The usage of varying teaching aids was analysed and coded. Textbooks were frequently used in SZ (17.8%) and SG (23.7%). Blackboards or white boards were also used in SZ (16.5%) and SG (7.2%). Overhead projectors were occasionally used by SZ teachers (8.9%), but never used in Singapore. Aids other than the above mentioned (e.g., big books, pictures, flashcards, puppets and toys related to the themes and topics) were widely used in SZ (44.3%) and SG (62.2%). This relatively over-proportional percentage of “other teaching aids” was caused by the coding system, which was originally developed for classroom observations in primary schools. This is because the larger project of this study is a comparison of preschool and primary school classrooms thus needs such a coding system shared by both educational levels (Li, Rao, & Tse, 2011). Accordingly, all the teaching aids seldom used in primary schools were coded as the “other teaching aids”.

Survey Data: Chinese Teachers' Beliefs and Reported Practices

Teachers' beliefs about literacy instruction. First, as shown in Table 1, SG teachers believed that young children were able to learn Chinese reading and writing, and SZ teachers regarded early literacy teaching as a preparation for school entry. Second, Shenzhen teachers felt that the most influential factors of children's early literacy learning were parental expectations for academic achievement, whereas the SG teachers were more concerned about the limited time assigned to Chinese lessons. Third, all the Chinese teachers believed that writing skills are the most important part of early literacy teaching. Fourth, half of the teachers in two cities believed in the balanced approach, whereas the other half preferred a child-centred approach. Lastly, more than 80% of the Chinese teachers in both cities felt that tests should be used to examine young children's literacy learning outcomes. In summary, most of the Chinese teachers interviewed supported summative assessment, a balanced approach to literacy instruction, writing skills training; they were also concerned about either parental expectation or young children's school readiness.

Table 1. *The Chinese Teachers' Beliefs and Practices regarding Early Literacy Teaching*

	Shenzhen	Singapore
<i>Beliefs</i>		
Why started teaching Chinese literacy in early childhood	Prepare for school entry	Age appropriate
The most influential factors on children's Chinese literacy learning	Parental expectations	Time limitation
The most important part of literacy teaching	Writing skills	Writing skills
	Balanced approach	Balanced approach
Teacher-directed VS child-initiated: Which is the best approach	(50%), child-initiated (50%)	(50%), child-initiated (50%)
Do you agree to use test in your school	No (83.3%)	No (100%)
<i>Practices</i>		
When children started learning to read Chinese	3 or 4 years	3 or 4 years
When children started learning to write Chinese	5 years	4 years
Major literacy teaching activities	Reading aloud,	Teaching characters,
	teaching characters	copying exercise
Most frequently used learning materials	nursery rhyme,	nursery rhyme,
	storybook	storybook
Did you have a Chinese teaching plan	Yes (50%)	Yes (33.3%)
Did you use specific teaching approach	Yes (50%)	Yes (66.7%)
The major teaching approaches	Direct teaching	Theme approach
Have you assigned any homework	Yes (100%)	No (100%)
Have parents been ever involved	Yes (66.7%)	Yes (16.7%)
Chinese books in the classroom	≥40	≥10
Frequency of updating the bookshelf	monthly	monthly

Teacher reported practices. There were more similarities than discrepancies in teachers' reported practices in Chinese literacy instruction between L1 and L2 teachers. First, all the teachers reported that they taught 3- or 4- year-olds to read Chinese characters. Normally, Singapore teachers started teaching the writing skills one year later. The children in Shenzhen kindergartens started learning to write when they were 5 years old, 1 to 2 years after learning to read, although Chinese writing instruction is officially not allowed by the educational authorities. Second, the major literacy teaching activities were direct teaching of Chinese characters, copying characters exercise, and reading aloud. Third, Chinese nursery rhymes

and storybooks were the most frequently used learning materials by all the teachers in Shenzhen and Singapore. Fourth, half of the Shenzhen teachers had teaching plans and used specific teaching approach, whereas few from Singapore (33.3%) planned their Chinese teaching lessons as they were using either a project approach or an emergent curriculum. Fifth, Singapore teachers tended to use the theme approach to teach Chinese literacy, whereas Shenzhen teachers used direct instruction. Sixth, all the Chinese teachers assigned some homework to young children, such as worksheets, parent-shared reading activities, and writing exercises. In addition, many SZ teachers (66.7%) reported that they had involved parents in children's literacy learning, whereas very few teachers in Singapore did so. Lastly, it is important to note that Singapore kindergarten classrooms featured few Chinese books (about 10 copies), whereas Shenzhen classrooms featured more books (more than 40 copies).

Interview Data: Difficulties Encountered and Suggestions for Improvements

L1/L2 teaching approaches. In the interviews, the six L1 teachers in Shenzhen reported that they commonly used the following Chinese literacy teaching approaches or curricula: Shared reading, listen-and-read, guided reading (whole-class and small group), parent-child shared reading, theme-based integrated teaching, random teaching in daily life, and bilingual narrative approach. The six L2 teachers in Singapore reported their commonly used approaches as follows: Theme-based integrated teaching, intuitive instruction, random teaching in daily life, whole language approach, project approach, story approach, and Total Physical Response (TPR) approach.

Difficulties encountered in L1/L2 teaching. The six Shenzhen teachers reported that the common difficulties encountered in L1 literacy classrooms were as follows: Large class sizes, no good literacy textbooks, dull Listen-and-read textbooks, few opportunities to teach literacy, too many individual differences to address, and weak/no parental involvement. The six Singapore teachers reported that their difficulties in L2 classrooms were as follows: Language environment (e.g., lack of Chinese language environment in school and at home); demanding, uncooperative parents; huge individual differences in children's learning motivation and ability (e.g., some children have neither interest nor incentive to learn Chinese, don't participate, have problems in learning adjustment, have neither attention nor patience, lack of

Table 2. Summary of the Interview Findings

City & Case	L1/L2 Teaching Approaches	Difficulties Encountered	Suggestions for Improvements
<i>Shenzhen</i>			
Case A	Shared reading; Listen-and-read.	Large class size; Too many students to teach; No good textbooks.	More teaching of literacy skills; More story teaching; More attention to grammar.
Case B	Guided reading (class & group); Parent-child shared reading.	Few opportunities to teach reading and writing	More interesting activities
Case C	Theme-based integrated teaching	Too many individual differences to teach	More interesting stories; More interactive activities
Case D	Listen-and-read	Listen-and-read textbook is boring.	More interesting activities; More play
Case E	Random teaching in daily life	Parental involvement	More play; More multisensory activities.
Case F	Bilingual narrative curriculum	Too many individual differences; Parental involvement.	More balance between the quantity and quality of children's learning experiences
<i>Singapore</i>			
Case G	Theme-based integrated teaching.	Lack of Chinese language environment; Home language is English; Kids don't want to speak Chinese; Kids have neither interest nor incentive to learn Chinese; Insufficient time for teaching (1 hour per day). Parents ask for learning too many	More play to provoke learning interest; More daily life activities in textbook.
Case H	Intuitive instruction; random teaching.	Chinese characters; Home-school collaboration; Lack of home language environment.	Better organized activities; More stories and interesting activities.
Case I	Whole language approach; Project approach.	Teachers hold different views about Chinese literacy teaching; Parents are too demanding. Gap between teacher's expectation	Change teachers' beliefs; More interesting activities.
Case J	Project approach	and children's performance; Lesson plan needs to be adjusted; Lack of home language environment.	More literacy learning materials included in the project; Better classroom setting to provoke learning interest.
Case K	Story approach; Flash card; Play.	Some children didn't participate; Huge individual differences; Different learning motivation and ability.	Nurturing of learning interest; Incorporating music, dance, art, and movement into literacy learning; More age appropriate activities.
Case L	Total physical response approach	Some kids have problems in learning adjustment; Some kids have neither attention nor patience; Some kids lack of learning ability.	More individualized facilitation and help; More interesting activities to provoke their learning interest.

learning ability, don't want to speak Chinese); teachers' concerns about time and professionalism (e.g., insufficient time for teaching Chinese, class teachers and Chinese teachers hold different views about Chinese literacy teaching, huge gap between teacher's expectation and children's performance, Chinese lesson plan needs to be adjusted to fit into L2 children).

Suggestions for improvement. Regarding ways to improve L1 teaching of Chinese literacy, the six teachers in Shenzhen suggested more teaching of literacy skills; more story teaching; more attention to grammar, more interesting, interactive and multisensory activities; more stories; more play; and more balance between the quantity and quality of children's learning experiences. The six Singapore teachers suggested more play to provoke learning interest; nurturing of learning interest; better classroom setting to provoke learning interest; more daily life activities in textbook; more literacy learning materials included in the teaching; better organized activities; more stories; more interesting and age appropriate activities; changing teachers' beliefs; incorporating music, dance, art, and movement into literacy learning; and more individualized facilitation and help.

In summary, the observation, survey, and interview data of this study indicated, repeatedly and consistently, a similar pattern of Chinese literacy pedagogy shared by L1 and L2 classrooms, with whole class direct instruction/interaction being the dominant mode. And there was a remarkable gap between Chinese teachers' beliefs and practice. Some societal differences in the reported teaching practice, common difficulties, and suggestions for improvement, were also found.

Discussion

This study examined the similarities and differences in teaching early Chinese literacy in Shenzhen and Singapore. The results provided empirical evidence to address those fundamental questions about early literacy teaching in both L1 and L2 contexts. In the following sections, we will try to analyse the major findings to understand the underpinning factors and educational implications for both Chinese L1 and L2 teaching.

Common Pedagogies Shared by L1 and L2 Classrooms

A common pattern of Chinese literacy pedagogies was shared by the L1 and L2 teachers in Shenzhen and Singapore preschool: Whole class direct instruction and interaction, lecturing with questioning, no play, shared reading and writing, reading aloud, language and content knowledge as the foci of instruction, preference for neutral feedback to probe children's thinking and learning, and short oral answer and sustained oral text as the dominating learning outcome. In addition, the teachers reported some common features of their Chinese literacy pedagogy: Early teaching of Chinese reading and writing, direct instruction, copying exercise, reading aloud, nursery rhymes and storybooks as learning materials, using specific teaching approach and having teaching plans, teaching with theme approach and whole class, assigning homework, and involving parents. Parts of these findings have already been reported by previous researchers (Li & Rao, 2000, 2005; Li, Tse, & Rao, 2012; Liu, Kotov, Rahim, & Goh, 2005; Wu, Li, & Anderson, 1999). This study, however, has provided a more comprehensive picture of the actual Chinese literacy pedagogy in L1 and L2 early childhood classrooms. Understanding this pedagogy might have implications for teaching innovations and education reforms in other societies such as USA where Chinese is taught as L2 by the teachers directly "imported" from China.

The present study found that although Western ideas had been widely advocated and a balanced approach was well-received by Chinese practitioners, traditionally direct teaching of Chinese literacy skills was still the core code. This is in line with our previous findings (Li, Rao, & Tse, 2011, 2012; Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011), which have been interpreted with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory. At the macrosystem level, Chinese traditional culture has had a profound influence on the ideological and philosophical bases of reading pedagogy, including views of young children, views of learning and development, and views of appropriate teacher-child relationships (Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012). At the microsystem level, Chinese literacy pedagogy might be influenced by the psycholinguistic features of Chinese language learning. Chinese logographic characters denote meaning rather than phonology, rote learning and copying exercise are needed in learning the reading of Chinese (Tan et al., 2005). Additionally, there are other constraints at the microsystem level in Shenzhen and Singapore, such as large class size, teacher-centred classroom setting,

untrained teachers, parental expectations, examination-oriented system, and the competition for survival arising out of increasing commercialisation in the early childhood education system (Ang, 2008; Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012; Ng, 2011). For instance, it was reported by the teachers that most of Chinese parents were very concerned about children's academic achievement and wanted their children to learn more Chinese characters to better prepare for primary school. To accommodate these highly demanding parents, all the Chinese teachers interviewed in the present study agreed to use examinations to assess students' literacy attainment. This has further promoted the overuse of rote learning and copying exercises in Chinese literacy classes. Meanwhile, teachers' beliefs, qualifications, and professionalism might be associated with the success of formulation and transformation of early childhood pedagogies in Chinese societies (Ang, 2008; Liu & Feng, 2005; Ng & Rao, 2008; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). These factors may become formidable in shaping the pattern of early Chinese literacy pedagogy in Shenzhen and Singapore.

Emerging Changes in Chinese Literacy Pedagogy

A remarkable belief-practice divide was found in the present study: Both the L1 and L2 Chinese teachers reported that they commonly believed in the balanced approach, which is a mixture of traditional Chinese literacy pedagogies and Western pedagogies. Although they were cognizant of the importance of child-centred learning and other Western ideas, the Chinese teachers ultimately subscribed to the importance of direct instruction for literacy learning and gave children many copying and reading exercises. This belief-practice divide has been repeatedly reported by numerous researchers of early childhood teaching in Hong Kong and mainland China (Cheng, 2001; Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011; Liu & Feng, 2005; Ng & Rao, 2008; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Ng and Rao (2008) suggested three ways to understand this belief-practice divide in early Chinese pedagogies: (1) Chinese teachers were influenced by their cultural beliefs and their own early childhood learning experiences; (2) the teachers may be caught in a transitional period of education reform; and (3) pressure from parents and primary schools may have a substantial influence on teachers' practices. This means that teachers will not necessarily apply theories to practice as they are expected (Bae-Suh, 2007), as they are strongly influenced by their teaching culture, beliefs, and parental expectations. If

they want to change the teaching culture at a personal level, they have to go through the seven stages: examination, preparation, engagement, adjustment, acceptance, advocacy, and projection (Pope & O'Sullivan, 1998). According to this framework, the Chinese teachers interviewed in this study were just in the first three stages and had not achieved the level of adjustment (Stage IV), which means “fit between context and culture” (Pope & O'Sullivan, 1998, p. 223).

Nevertheless, some emerging changes and societal differences have been noted in the present study. For example, the Chinese teachers frequently used questionings, individual interactions, as well as positive and neutral feedback to encourage child-initiated learning and theme-based explorations. Some societal differences were also found in the classroom observations: Pedagogies transplanted from the West, such as project approach, whole language approach, and Total Physical Response approach were used in Singapore preschools to teach Chinese literacy. But in Shenzhen, more traditionally Chinese pedagogies such as shared reading, theme-based teaching, intuitive instructions still dominated the classrooms. These findings indicated that Singapore Chinese teachers may be more likely to adopt Western pedagogies.

Same Language, Different Problems

This study found that the difficulties encountered in L1 literacy classrooms included large class size (too many students to teach), no good literacy textbooks (listen-and-read textbook is boring), few opportunities to teach literacy, too many individual differences to teach, and weak/no parental involvement. These problems were caused by the policies and regulations enacted in Mainland China. For example, kindergartens are not allowed to teach literacy and use textbooks, and no subject teaching is allowed (Li & Rao, 2000; Li, Rao, & Tse, 2011). There are neither official textbooks nor guidelines about it thus all the published textbooks in the market were not reviewed and rated by the educational authorities. Additionally, kindergarten class sizes can be large, as much as 35 students for a 4-year-old classroom and 40 for 5-year- old classroom (Li, Rao, & Tse, 2011). Some parents teach children reading and writing at home, whereas others do not, leading to greater individual differences among the children. Therefore, the L1 teachers in Shenzhen suggested the following improvements:

More teaching of literacy skills; more interesting, interactive and multisensory activities and stories; and more balance between the quantity and quality of children's learning experiences. It is time for the educational authorities to rethink the policies regarding early teaching and learning of Chinese literacy.

The L2 teachers in Singapore encountered a different set of problems: Lack of Chinese language environment, lack of support from demanding parents, incapable and unmotivated children with varying background, and lack of professionalism amongst the teachers. All these problems were also caused by the bilingual education policies in Singapore. Singapore launched the compulsory bilingual education policy for half century and has successfully made English the first and national language for every child. Now, in other studies of this project, we found that most of the Singapore Chinese parents didn't speak Chinese to kids at home, and teachers who were not responsible for Chinese class did not speak Chinese in school. Without language environment and support from parents, Chinese children have neither interest nor incentive to learn Chinese literacy. This helps to explain why Shenzhen teachers were able to involve parents in children's literacy learning (and they want more parental involvement), whereas very few teachers in Singapore could do so. Although Singapore parents have high expectation on children's Chinese literacy, they don't speak Chinese at home, and the Chinese teachers have few opportunities and little time to teach their children. Therefore, to provoke and nurture children's learning interest, Singapore teachers suggested more play and better classroom settings, more daily life activities in textbook, more literacy learning materials included in the project approach activities, more interesting and age appropriate activities and stories, and better training.

In addition to the language policies, language proficiency may also play an important role in making different problems to L1 and L2 teaching. For example, this study found some individual learning activities in L1 Shenzhen but nothing in L2 Singapore. This might be related to the facts that Singapore preschoolers are not good enough in Chinese literacy to conduct individual learning and that the teaching time for Chinese is very limited. Similarly, the other finding that the Shenzhen teachers used more positive feedback than their counterparts in Singapore (42.6% versus 19.9%) might be also associated with the difference in Chinese proficiency between their students. As reported, the Singapore teachers were not satisfied with their students' learning motivation and performance thus made fewer positive

responses. All these findings imply that the educational authorities need to change the bilingual education policy as soon as possible to create a better bilingual learning environment, and should consider treating Chinese as a mother tongue language (rather than L2) for the ethnic Chinese in Singapore.

This study has several limitations. The sample size ($N=12$ classrooms) is relatively small, and large-scale studies using more diverse and representative samples should be conducted to delineate the authentic teaching practices in contemporary Chinese societies. As it stands, however, the study offers a descriptive and needed account of early Chinese literacy pedagogies in L1 and L2 contexts. The findings suggest that direct transplanting of Chinese pedagogies into L2 classrooms might encounter varying resistances from language environment, parents, children and teachers. Reform leaders and policymakers need to articulate a coherent vision shared by all the stakeholders and to jointly explore the contextually appropriate way to teaching Chinese as L2. Contextual appropriateness should be seriously considered when nations engage in importing Chinese teachers and their pedagogies from China. It is important to note that best pedagogies for early Chinese literacy could be adapted from China but could never be directly transplanted. And successfully early literacy pedagogies, whatever L1 or L2, should be contextually and linguistically appropriate. It is a pity that the landscape of ECE in China and Singapore has been standardized and homogenized by the Western views and “universalized” in a narrow way (Tzuo, 2011). It is time for the policy makers, scholars, and practitioners in Chinese and even Asian countries to pay more attention to their own cultural beliefs and teaching practices and protect and pass on this “endangered educational ecology” (Tobin, 2011, p.3) to the next generation.

Acknowledgement

This article is based on a project (CERG 7445/06H) funded by the Research Grants Council of the Government of the Hong Kong SAR. Thanks are expressed to Dr. Eva Chen and the participating children and teachers.

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