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Audiovisual Method, Psycholinguistics and Sociocultural Approaches in Teaching Chinese

Svetlana Korovina^{a*}, Anna Pushkina^b, Lyudmila Krivoshlykova^c

* Corresponding author: Svetlana Korovina, svetlanakorovina@list.ru

^aPeoples' Friendship University of Russia, 10/2, Miklukho-Maklaya str., Russia, svetlanakorovina@list.ru

^bPeoples' Friendship University of Russia, 10/2, Miklukho-Maklaya str., Russia, pushkina4@yandex.ru

^cPeoples' Friendship University of Russia, 10/2, Miklukho-Maklaya str., Russia, lvk1404@mail.ru

Abstract

Growth of popularity of Chinese in Russia requires regular upgrading of the course contents, means, methods of teaching in the frame of international standards in language education. Communicative language teaching of Chinese suggests new effective methodological tools and techniques in language skills training. The purpose of teaching Chinese is built around the notion of communicative competence and seeks to develop functional communicative skills in students due to the set of methodological principles and syllabus specifications which are incorporated into the method which contributes to successful achievement of the aforesaid goal. The research methods are based on psycholinguistics and sociocultural approaches combined. Classroom activities include regular work with the practical audiovisual course developed by the authors. The course contains a Student's book, a Teacher's book, a CD with 55 short (max. 5 mins.) authentic films. Each section of the course is followed by exercises and methodological recommendations to work with audiovisual material. Such tasks as *stating the main idea of the micro-film*, *debating*, *role-playing* contribute to students' mastering communicative skills. As a result, the practical course of Chinese sets an appropriate level of challenge for Russian students and keeps them motivated. The activities in the course are designed to recycle knowledge and demonstrate language acquisition. Along with well-balanced combination of psycholinguistics and sociocultural approaches, both teachers and students feel a real sense of achievement.

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1. Introduction

Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (PFUR), one of the top universities of the Russian Federation, is famous for its international cooperation with world leading universities especially with Chinese universities such as Shandong Normal University, Jilin University (Changchun), Xi'an

Normal University. Each year thousands of Chinese students come to PFUR to study linguistics, philology, literature, journalism, psychology and other humanities and sciences. More and more Russian students are getting involved in various exchange programmes provided by Chinese universities. Growth of popularity of China, its culture, history, literature and language requires regular upgrading of the course contents, means, methods of teaching in the frame of international standards in language education. Undoubtedly, language is integral part of the culture of native speakers and one of the key means of conveying it to other nations. The process of acquiring a foreign language suggests acquiring cultural and linguistic view of native speakers. This phenomenon cannot be ignored in terms of constantly changing polycultural and multilingual world. This challenge motivates and stimulates teachers to teach language in the frame of psycholinguistics and sociocultural approaches.

For this reason we highlight the fact that communicative skills are considered to be one of the priorities when teaching linguists, interpreters and translators in PFUR. This idea is closely identified with the work of O. Maslovets who underlines the connection between language acquisition and culture studies. Moreover, Maslovets draws our attention to the fact that well-trained interpreters and translators represent their country and are to demonstrate respect towards others nations and their values (Maslovets, 2012, p.5). Thus, communicative competence-oriented educational process makes listening a significant part and an effective tool to promote reading, writing and speaking skills in this complex process of teaching Chinese.

2. Problem statement

Leading Russian and foreign experts in the methodology of teaching Chinese (Kochergin, 2012; Maslovets, 2012; Zhang, G. X., & Li, L. M., 2010; Chen, J., Wang, Ch., Cai, J., 2010; Ye, 2011) point out the importance of upgrading methods of teaching Chinese. Difficulties in the methodology in teaching Chinese are caused by “a lack of appropriate textbooks, a lack of qualified and experienced Chinese teachers, and a lack of teacher training programs” (Ye, 2011, p.2).

It should be noted that only in the eighties of the twentieth century Russia witnessed the breakthrough in the field of China studies due to E. Kochergin’s research in 1984 which was based on experience of teaching Chinese all over the world and followed by his textbook in 2012 on methods of teaching Chinese. According to Kochergin, listening is an essential tool in developing communicative skills in Chinese. Listening skills are formed by the following abilities: 1) perception of fluent speech in Chinese, recognizing sounds/phonemes; 2) identifying the communicative purpose of a received message; 3) highlighting basic informative elements and logical structures; 4) stating the main idea (Kochergin, 2012, p.14).

The problems of teaching listening at universities has always been of great interest to researchers from different countries. For instance, L. Krivoshlykova (PFUR, Russia) and A. Pushkina (PFUR, Russia) in their research on training interpreters (2012) offer the system of classes aimed to listening skills development. In 2013 S. Korovina (PFUR, Russia) presented her report at the XIII International Social Congress in Moscow devoted to peculiarities and difficulties of teaching listening in Chinese at different levels at universities. The results of her research were highly appreciated by colleagues and

experts from leading universities. In our research, we adhere to basic “communicative methods” in teaching foreign languages suggested by Ye. Passov in 1989 who states that listening is a complex process involving such activity as so-called active listening when the students try to hear not only the words another person is saying but more crucially to their best to understand the complete message being sent.

Russian leading experts in teaching foreign languages (A. Leontiev, 1997; I. Zimnyaya, 2001) stick to the opinion that teaching listening is deeply interconnected with psycholinguistics. Successful listening depends not only on basic knowledge of students but on their mental abilities to predict, memorize and focus on a received message. Taking everything into consideration, we strongly believe that the purpose of teaching Chinese is built around the notion of communicative competence and seeks to develop functional communicative skills in students due to the set of methodological principles and syllabus specifications which are incorporated into the method which contributes to successful achievement of the aforesaid goal.

3. Research questions

Communicative language teaching of Chinese suggests new effective methodological tools and techniques in language skills training, listening is considered integral part of this complex process. One of the main peculiarity of Chinese is the difficulty of perception of oral speech, especially one of native speakers. That is why listening in Chinese turns out to be one of the most difficult and time-consuming aspects in teaching Chinese to Russian students. At PFUR the practical course of the Chinese language is divided into several stages. *At the stage for beginners* the key idea is to develop the listening skill and teach students to perceive the main idea of the message.

Along with this, such aspects as language material, communicative tasks and exercises should be duly considered in the educational process. We reckon that the task-based and audiolingual methods are the most effective methods in developing listening skills. Figure 1 presents listening tasks in the three-phase framework of teaching Chinese (see Figure1).

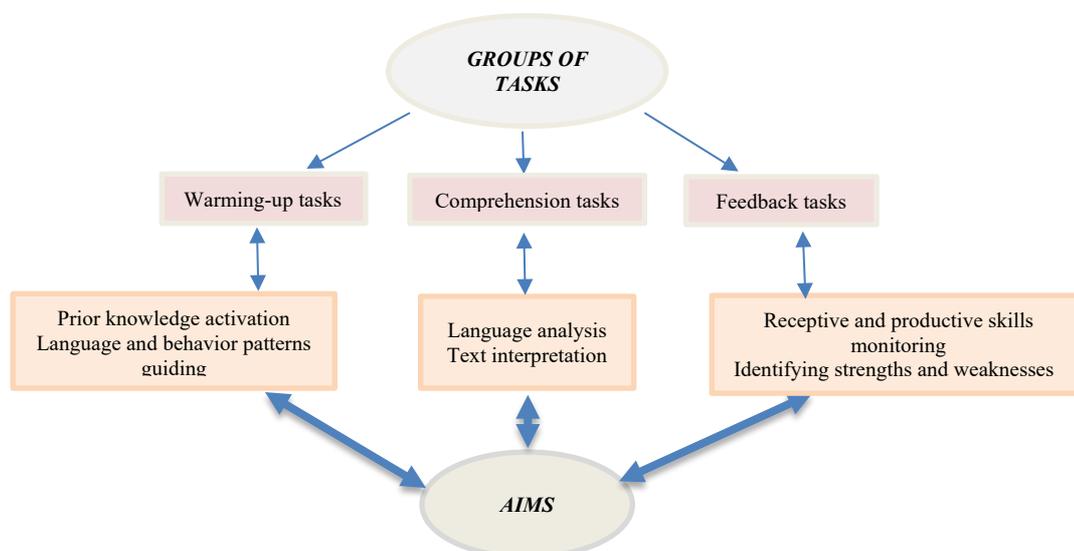


Fig. 1. Listening tasks in the three-phase framework.

As listed in Fig.1 there are three groups of tasks which are used by teachers during the whole period of teaching. We call them warming-up, comprehension and feedback tasks.

Thus, at the *first* stage the students are supposed to do warming-up tasks to avoid a certain number of difficulties they may face while listening. Such tasks focus on developing skills to recognize concrete sounds or images, understand intonation, improve the mental representation of the message a listener gets from hearing and be ready to predict the chain of events and the ending of an audio text.

The *second* group of so-called comprehension tasks are aimed to encourage students to properly extract the key information from an audio text. These tasks comprise exercises which are used at all stages of working with an audio text (pre-listening, while-listening, post-listening).

The *third* group of so-called feedback tasks, on the one hand, provides the students with opportunities to demonstrate their ability to perceive and analyze the audio text; on the other hand, it provides the teacher with the opportunity to check the students' receptive and productive skills and correct mistakes. This three-phase framework of tasks proved to be quite efficient and flexible for teaching beginners.

4. Purpose of the study

Teaching Chinese is built around the notion of communicative competence and seeks to develop functional communicative skills in students due to the set of methodological principles and syllabus specifications which are incorporated into the method which contributes to successful achievement of the aforesaid goal. In the frame of PFUR syllabus teaching listening are to meet the standards of levels of Chinese (HSK-3, HSK-4). That is why task and exercises focus on listening and complete comprehension of an oral text. Moreover, *at the stage of intermediate or higher levels* students are ready to work with authentic audiovisual material.

A number of authors emphasize the efficiency of audiovisual method in overcoming numerous difficulties when studying foreign languages: "lack of motivation, lack of exposure to the target language and lack of pronunciation by teacher" (Adamu Bilkisu & others, 2016). Audiovisual tools combined with task-based teaching make communicative skills development central to the learning process. "Students learn when they are motivated and curious about something. Traditional verbal instructions can be boring and painful for students. However, use of audio-visual provides intrinsic motivation to students by peaking their curiosity and stimulating their interests in the subjects" (Adamu Bilkisu & others, 2016); "Classroom environment should stimulate creativity, develop positive interests, attitudes" (Mathew & Alidmat, 2013, p. 87). Due to properly organized teacher-student cooperation and interaction, we manage for success and practical advantages in improving communicative skills. "A good understanding of audio-visual resources can make the EFL classroom interactive. These resources are more appropriately used when new topics are being introduced in the classroom and values for effective learning" (Mathew & Alidmat, 2013, p. 91). Kim (2015) puts forwards the idea that "listening does not represent a simple word-byword translation, but rather involves a deeper understanding of the meaning". In addition, a highly professional teacher is one who

guides “students in understanding actual speech so that students learn to deal with genuine conversations and real listening situations” (p.15).

The key factor while receiving an oral message (especially an authentic one) is a social and cultural background of a recipient. That is why the sociocultural approach plays the crucial role in teaching Chinese. “Language and culture are closely related with each other. Language is a part of culture and plays an important role in it. On the one hand, culture cannot be transmitted without language. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture. Language and culture interact with each other and the understanding of one influences the understanding of the other” (Ji & Zhang, 2010, p.7).

Thus, watching authentic films in the classroom provides a significant source of extra lingual information: customs and traditions, rules of behavior and relations in various social situations. All the challenges we faced while preparing for creative and effective lessons encouraged us to work out the practical course of Chinese for Russian students. This course is focused on audiovisual content based on psycholinguistics and sociocultural approaches combined.

5. Research methods

Classroom activities include regular work with the practical course which is called “Audiovisual course of Chinese for Russian students” developed by the authors. The course contains a Student’s book, a Teacher’s book, a CD with 55 authentic micro- films (max. 5 mins.) All the film were produces by one of the Beijing TV channels. They present life in modern China through the prism of social cultural, ethic and philosophical aspects. The very titles of the micro-films are quite informative. For example:

- “Honesty” (Chengshi) is about a bus-conductor searching for the young man who had paid 50 yuan instead of 2 to return his change.
- “A feathered friend” (Feilaide pengyou) is about a wounded dove found and saved by generous children that provokes thoughts about humanistic approach of upbringing children in modern China.
- “Don’t miss your State Exams” (Gan kao) is about a boy who risked missing his State Exam but helped strangers in trouble.
- “Neighbours’ festive dinner” (Linju jie) is about the relations of neighbours in a block of flats.
- “Missing page” (Tui shu) is about honesty and decency. A man tore out a page with the lines he needed out of the book in a bookshop. But this book was bought for him by his wife as a present. When it turned out that one page was missing the owner of the bookshop returned the money to the lady. Just imagine the shame he was overwhelmed by because of his indecency.
- “Father” (Fuqin) is about a young man who graduated from a Beijing University and married a Beijing girl and is ashamed of his provincial parents. When his father came to Beijing, he suggested him staying at a hotel but not in his flat. But his shame was ruined buy the traditional Chinese values and deep respect to his father: “How miserable I am to be ashamed of my roots”. And the young couple welcomed the old man in the own place and demonstrated all their sincere love and respect.

It should be noted that all the audiovisual materials meet all the methodological requirements such as: time-limit, natural fluency of native speakers; standard Mandarin (no slang, no colloquialisms),

authenticity, emotional coloring based on national values. Each unit in the Students' book is followed by a list of new words, speech patterns, grammar comments and various exercises. The Teacher's book includes scripts, keys to exercises, methodological recommendations and extra tasks and topics for the essays. Moreover, we recommend using "New Practical Chinese Reader" (Liu, 2016) as a back-up and a teacher may use all the exercises to practice lexical and grammatical material.

We underline that the tasks from the three-phase framework (Fig.1) favourably fit in the work with authentic microfilms. As the students are accustomed to the three-phase framework, they easily and enthusiastically switch to the work with audiovisual materials. Table 1 laconically presents the whole procedure of each session (see Table 1).

Table 1. Procedure of each session.

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Tasks</i>	<i>Procedure</i>
Pre-watching stage	warming-up tasks	TASK 1: Check new words and expressions. TASK 2: Read sociocultural background information relevant to the topic of the film. TASK 3: Speculate on the main idea of the film. TASK 4: Predict the development of events.
While-watching stage	comprehension tasks	TASK 1: Recognize new words and expressions. TASK 2: Analyze speech and behavior patterns and grammar constructions. TASK 3: Watch the film for the gist/details.
Post-watching stage	feedback tasks	TASK 1: Answer the questions. TASK 2: Get involved in the film construction and reconstruction process. TASK 3: Have a group discussion.

Here we present how this procedure works. The film "Birthday" tells about grandma Li living in a home for the elderly. Many years ago, her son left for the USA but she refused to go with him and had to move to this special place. She shares the room with another old lady, grandma Zhang who lives here since her house is too small and too noisy because of her little grandchildren. Grandma Li is very sorry for her son not visiting her even on her birthday but she is very proud of his achievements in a foreign country whereas grandma Zhang is looking forwards to going home for celebrating her birthday. The teacher should draw the students' attention to the physiological and sociocultural aspect of the film - (Xiao) – a virtue of respect for one's parents, elders, ancestors in Confucian philosophy, which is considered a key virtue in Chinese culture. Nevertheless, this Xiao was transformed into "fuliyuan" (the home of happiness) - a new phenomenon which has appeared in modern China due to "One-child-limit" government policy. But respect for the elders is still a crucial value for the Chinese. Table 2 illustrates the three-stage procedure with the concrete audiovisual material (see Table 2):

Table 2. Procedure of working with the film "Birthday"(Guo shengri).

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Tasks</i>	<i>Procedure</i>
Pre-watching stage	warming-up tasks	TASK 1: Check new words and expressions. TASK 2: Read about "xiao"; "fuliyuan"; the one-child government policy; the traditions of having birthday parties. TASK 3: Share your expectations about the main idea of the film. TASK 4: Predict the development of events.

While-watching stage	comprehension tasks	<p>TASK 1: Recognize new words and expressions.</p> <p>TASK 2: Analyze the formulaic expressions and demeanor of the two women. Focus on their intonation and how it matches their facial expressions.</p> <p>TASK 3: Grasp the central concept of the film (sociocultural and ethical aspects of life/the notion of happiness). Concentrate on the developed relationship between the characters/emotional attitudes towards the problem they are speaking about.</p>
Post-watching stage	feedback tasks	<p>TASK 1: Answer the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How old is grandma Li? (Zhang?) - When is grandma Li's birthday? (grandma Zhang's?) - How do they usually celebrate their birthdays? - Explain why each of them is living in the "fuliyuan". - Give your reasons for grandma Zhang feeling unhappy. <p>TASK 2: Summarize the main points discussed in the film. Interpret the mood of each old woman.</p> <p>TASK 3: Have a group discussion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Define the problem raised in the film. - Speak on how the government policy may influence the Chinese people's way of life. - Debate on the parental respect issue in China and Russia. - Compare the Chinese tradition of celebrating birthdays with the one in Russia.

For more constructive, appropriate and positive feedback, it is recommended that students should be engaged in creative and critical writing. They are offered to write film reviews, essays, scripts and one-page stories of their own in Chinese.

6. Findings

In the course of the work with the developed "Audiovisual course of Chinese for Russian students", the students experienced significant progress in listening skills acquisition, acquired sociocultural knowledge, improved language and communicative competence. Moreover, the vast majority of students took a great interest in new forms of work, expressed their willingness to be engaged in a various, independent activity such as reading books and newspapers, watching films and news programmes in Chinese. This allows us to talk about efficiency of the developed practical course, which can be considered as part of an additional resource of Chinese language training. Psycholinguistics and sociocultural approaches proved to be instrumental in developing culture-oriented aspects. Students find it less difficult to translate and use Chinese idioms, proverbs and sayings. For example, the moral in the film "Neighbours' festive dinner" (Linju jie) fits in the well-known Chinese proverb "Neighbor is better than distant relatives" (yuanqin buru jinlin). When students are aware of traditions, norms and values they master difficulties in communicating with native speakers.

7. Conclusions

This methodology enables students to acquire good speaking skills (as a result of the spoken Chinese they absorb, helps to improve their pronunciation), reading skills (as a result of word recognition while reading appropriate culture-oriented texts), writing skills (the students' spelling and grammatical accuracy improve along with the writing habits, critical thinking and creativity).

Knowledge of social etiquette, national linguistic and cultural worldview, national values and beliefs contribute to communicative competence development. It turned out that the students involved in various exchange programmes went through the adaptation period and cultural shock less dramatically while those lacking proper knowledge experienced difficulties and it took time to catch up with the others.

As a result, the audiovisual course of Chinese sets an appropriate level of challenge for Russian students and keeps them motivated. The activities in the course are designed to recycle knowledge and demonstrate language acquisition. Along with well-balanced combination of psycholinguistics and sociocultural approaches, both teachers and students feel a real sense of achievement.

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