

## Letter to the Editor from Dr Lijian Hong

Dear editor,

I always feel good to read feedback on my views. I think it is important to have a debate on the nature of teaching Chinese in Australia.

Anyone who has read Dr Orton's length report should appreciate her effort to collect a huge amount of statistical data, which should be a solid foundation for any serious research.

However, like many things in the world, statistics can be interpreted in a quite different way - just like my name has been interpreted by a non-Chinese speaker as a female's name. This Jian is not that Jane.

When one feels that he/she is misinterpreted by media report, people like Professor Marginson would immediately issue a statement to clarify his position. Indeed, Dr Orton is aware that there are different kind of Chinese background students, but she said clearly to ABC presenter Sen Lam that a "classroom learner is somebody who does not speak Chinese at home, whatever their ethnic background is."

(<http://www.abc.net.au/ra/programguide/stories/200810/s2393953.htm> ).

As most Chinese kids speak certain degree of Chinese at home, doesn't this suggest that we should exclude them from classroom? If somebody speaks Chinese at home but who is unable to read and write Chinese, shall we get them "out of the way of the beginners", as Dr Orton said?

In some schools and universities, Chinese background students are excluded from Chinese studies programs, regardless of their actual language proficiency level and Chinese language communicative competence. However, if "English teach English" is acceptable, I don't see there is any pedagogic, cultural and social reason for this exclusion policy.

In my humble opinion, the key issue here is not who teach who or who should be allowed to learn Chinese in Australian schools, it is more about how we teach, what kind of Chinese we teach and what strategy we should adopt to teach different Chinese learners, regardless whether they speak Chinese at home or not.

In fact, the biggest challenge to Australian school and university Chinese programs is whether or not we are capable of developing different levels of Chinese program to accommodate our increasingly diversified Chinese learners, including Chinese background students.

Despite some pessimistic comments about Australia's hostile environment for foreign language learning, Australia is not far behind its European and American counterparts in research in inter-cultural language learning which should provide a theoretic platform for Australian Chinese language teachers to develop a "localised" Chinese curriculum that has shorter "cultural distance" for non-background students to understand Chinese as a culture as well as a language, but at the same time presents a different view about Chinese culture, society and history that will help even students from mainland China to rethink their previous education.

If the purpose of language learning is not to copy native speakers, but to build up one own "third place", there is no reason to be intimidated by native speakers, said Kramersch.

Cheers,

Lijian Hong

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