

Interview

Language Acquisition and Chinese Language Programs: An Interview with Boping Yuan

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Abstract

This is an interview with Dr. Boping Yuan, Reader in Chinese Language and Linguistics at Cambridge University, UK and professor of linguistics and applied linguistics at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China. In this interview, Dr. Boping Yuan looks back on his 30 or so years of experience directing the modern Chinese language program at Cambridge University and working in the field of second language acquisition. He describes the changes and the future of Chinese language programs in teaching and researching Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) contexts and his viewpoints on CFL teacher development. He also gives a detailed explanation on the issue of interface and feature configuration in second language acquisition, and discusses the transfer effect in third language acquisition. Furthermore, Dr. Boping Yuan offers an outlook on the future of language acquisition research which will become more interdisciplinary and will be combined with modern technologies to advance human well-being. In the end, he provides valuable advice for young researchers on their path to pursuing second language acquisition as a profession.

Keywords

Teaching and researching Chinese as a foreign language, Chinese language program, second language acquisition, third language acquisition, language teaching

Dr. Boping Yuan is Reader in Chinese Language and Linguistics at Cambridge University, and Fellow and Director of Studies in Churchill College, Cambridge, UK. He is also a distinguished professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China. His research interests include empirical studies of developmental and synchronic aspects of second language acquisition, bilingualism and multilingualism, linguistic approaches to non-native Chinese grammars, second language acquisition theory, formal linguistics, and syntax and semantics.

He was Vice President of the International Society of Chinese Language Teaching in 2005-2009, and has been serving as a member of its executive committee since 2010. He is also an executive committee member of the International Association of Chinese Linguistics. He has been elected as General Editor of *Journal of Second Language Studies* (John Benjamins), and has been serving as a member of editorial boards of a number of international journals, such as *Second Language Research*, *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, *Chinese Teaching in the World*, etc. He is also an

advisor to *Second Language*, *British Chinese Language Teaching Society*, *Singapore Centre for Chinese as a Second Language*.

Thank you Professor Yuan for accepting my invitation to do this interview. You are well known for research on acquisition of Chinese as second/foreign language. Could you please tell us how you have developed an interest in this field?

It is a long story. I studied at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 1986 and 1987. At that time, I did applied linguistics and some general linguistics. In 1988, I got a scholarship from the British Council to study at Edinburgh University in Scotland, where I first did my Master degree in applied linguistics and then I did my Ph.D in Theoretical and Applied Linguistics. While I was studying at Edinburgh University, I was asked to teach as a teaching assistant in the Chinese department and to teach Chinese to some individuals in Scotland. At that time, China had just opened its door to the western world. And there were not many Chinese people around, so people who could teach Chinese were in short supply at that time. While I was doing that, I just realized teaching English as a foreign language or teaching Spanish as a foreign language was quite well-developed, while there was little work on teaching Chinese as a foreign language, or no work was done on the acquisition of Chinese as a second language. Coincidentally, at that time, I had to decide what topic I would focus on for my Ph.D research. Because I had training in teaching English as a foreign language and also because teaching Chinese as a foreign language was still a new field, I thought why not take this opportunity to do a comparison study to see when Chinese people come to learn English, and when English speaking people learn Chinese, which is more difficult. So my Ph.D thesis was on directionality of difficulty in second language acquisition of English and Chinese, just to make a comparison between the acquisition of Chinese and the acquisition of English as a second language. So from then on, my research career has just focused on the acquisition of Chinese as well as the acquisition of English. That's the trigger of my interest in second language acquisition or language acquisition. And the more research I do in the field, the more passion I have and the more curious I become.

What projects are you presently working on?

I'm currently working on third language acquisition. I got a grant from the Arts and Humanity Research Council in England for a project called "Bilingualism and Multilingualism in the Context of Chinese". So I have been working on this L3 (L3 is short for third language) acquisition or bilingual or multilingual project, which involves the acquisition of Mandarin Chinese by L1 (L1 is short for first language) English speakers and L2 (L2 is short for second language) Cantonese speakers, and by L1 Cantonese speakers and L2 English speakers in the acquisition of L3 Mandarin Chinese. This project also involves heritage speakers of Mandarin Chinese. Heritage speakers refer to the second generation or third generation of Mandarin-speaking families who immigrated to America and the United Kingdom. And we aim to test in what way their Mandarin is different from Mandarin spoken by people in China, and in what way Mandarin spoken by heritage speakers is different from L2 speakers of Mandarin and L3 speakers of Mandarin. It's a big project going on.

You have been teaching Chinese language and linguistics and directing the modern Chinese language program at Cambridge University for almost 30 years. Have Chinese language programs abroad changed over time? In what ways?

It has changed significantly and beyond recognition. When I first started teaching in Cambridge, Chinese programs in Cambridge and other universities in the UK were very small. At that time only probably four or five universities had a Chinese language program. But now, almost every university in the UK has a Chinese language program. Although they may not necessarily have a degree program, many of them have modules of Chinese in their degree programs. So the number of universities offering Chinese language is booming and thriving.

And the number of students learning Chinese is increasing very significantly as well. When I first arrived in Cambridge, the number of students in a year was sometimes two or three, but now the average is probably about fifteen. The number of applicants is increasing. For instance, over a hundred people apply to Cambridge every year, but only about fifteen of them manage to get into the program, because Cambridge is very selective. If you look at the whole UK or the whole world, including North America, Australia, and Europe, the number of people learning Chinese is increasing significantly. It is reported that more than 100 million people are learning Mandarin Chinese in the world. That's a huge number.

Moreover, the teaching materials are booming. That is a big change with the development of modern technology. People can not only use textbooks, but also get access to materials online. The virtual experience online offers various choices to both students and teachers.

In addition, the teaching methods have changed. Grammar-translation method was mainly used when I first arrived in Cambridge. But now the development of teaching method in teaching Chinese as a foreign language goes together with teaching other languages as foreign languages, like teaching English, Spanish, and German. The teaching methods are in more varieties now, such as the immersion method, the communicative method, the task-based method, etc. And also the information technology (IT) helps to reform the teaching method in language teaching, not only in Chinese language teaching, but in other language teaching. To sum up, the field has changed beyond recognition, and the changes occurred not only in the UK but also in other parts of the world.

What lessons, if any, have you learned by maintaining a Chinese language program abroad? Are there any challenges or difficulties?

The challenges we faced thirty years ago included how to expand the program, how to attract students, how to increase the number of applicants, and how we could increase or maintain the number of students studying Chinese. Sometimes we attracted students who came to study Chinese and then halfway through they found it too difficult and gave up. In the past, people coming to learn Chinese were purely interest-driven, as China was not as influential as it is today. They were curious about the Chinese culture, Chinese history, Chinese paintings, etc. Nowadays we still have students who are interested in these areas. But an increasing number of students want to learn Chinese in order to get a good job, to find a job in international companies. So in that aspect, we are facing a kind of situation that some people only want to learn the contemporary aspect of China. In Cambridge, students not only learn modern Chinese, they also have to learn classical Chinese. They have to read *Zi Zhi Tong Jian (History As A Mirror)* and *Lun Yu (The Analects)*. But some students hold a utilitarian attitude to it and question the usefulness of this for their job in a company. For us, we think that in order to understand China today, people need to know the past of China and the history of China. Therefore, we have to balance this and persuade students to understand that it is also important to learn the past of China if they want to be a China expert. That is a challenge to many teachers or departments in university.

Besides, I think we are faced with reduction of financial support because of the economic recession. But I very much hope this is only a temporary setback. When the economy returns to the normal, I hope we will continue to receive the financial help. And also, there is a potential issue: now universities are so used to online teaching, and maybe some authorities in universities may think online teaching is economical and they don't have to put lots of funding in hiring teachers. That is a potential risk for

the profession. Hopefully they will not look into the possibility of saving money by cutting language teaching posts.

Where do you see Chinese language programs in foreign countries going in the future?

I'm still confident and I'm still positive. I think Chinese language programs will have an even brighter future. Although it may have temporary setbacks against the background of complex international situations, for a long term, it has a bright future. The international status of China at the international stage is improving. And China is the world's second largest economy in the world. This is the fact that no one can or will deny. And people have to accept this fact. In a long term, I think Chinese language teaching will have a bright future because China is getting stronger and Chinese economy and Chinese government are having an increasingly more influential role in the international stage. Therefore, there's no doubt that the need for the Chinese language will increase with the rising of China. I have every confidence in the development of teaching Chinese in the world.

As we all know, teachers play a crucial role in language teaching. Then how can we better prepare future teachers for teaching Chinese as a foreign language?

For me, to be a good teacher of the Chinese language, first, people have to know the language well. It is not the case that if one can speak Chinese, then he or she can teach Chinese. Potential teachers have to have a proper training in Chinese linguistics and linguistic theories, which are the basic or fundamental knowledge of teaching Chinese language. They have to know theories of second language acquisition, so that they know how the language (i.e., Chinese) can be acquired by adults in learning a second language. Second, they have to have the training in teaching methodology. Nowadays, some people think grammar-translation method is dead. To me, it's not dead, and it is still alive. Teachers have to decide when to use the grammar-translation method and when the task-based teaching method is useful. They have to decide when a particular method is useful and when another particular method is not useful, based on their professional training. And another quality a language teacher of Chinese has to acquire is that they have to be IT literate. Teachers have to know how to use internet and how to conduct the teaching on Zoom, on *Tengxun Huiyi* (VooV Meeting), etc. Most importantly, potential teachers have to love their profession. Without the passion for one's profession, one will not do the job well. Though many people think that as long as they can speak Chinese and they have the training in teaching and teaching methodology, they don't need the knowledge of the complicated linguistic theory or the second language acquisition theory. I disagree. I think this should be part of knowledge of a Chinese language teacher.

One area of your research focuses on second language interfaces between syntax-semantics, syntax-discourse, syntax-pragmatics, etc. Why do you think the issue of interface is important for second language acquisition?

In adult second language acquisition, one of the puzzles to everyone is that a human being can learn their first language easily and effortlessly, and within four or five years, a child can master his or her first language without endless drills, repetition, and efforts. Children can learn their first language very rapidly and easily. In contrast, adults spend hours and hours, years and years studying a second or foreign language. They can make progress, but very few adults can manage to reach native competence of the target language. Then people wonder how come most of adults fail to reach native competence, even though they spent significantly more hours in learning the target language. So why? There are many theories about this. For instance, the Critical Period Hypothesis argues that after the critical period,

people can no longer acquire a native competence of the target language. The Universal Grammar theory argues that part of the universal grammar is still available. For example, lexical words like *table*, *cup*, and *computer* are still available, but functional words are no longer available to adult language learners. Then Sorace and Filiacci proposed an Interface Hypothesis, dealing with the issue from a different angle. According to them, the difficulty or the impossibility of reaching native competence is not because of the critical period hypothesis, nor the availability or unavailability of the functional categories in the universal grammar. The difficulty is from the integration, coordination, and interaction between different domains in the language faculty. The language faculty in our brain is divided into different domains, including syntax, morphology, phonetics, semantics, and the lexicon. All these domains have independent locations in the mind, and these domains also interact with each other and with other cognitive domains, like pragmatics, discourse, etc. According to Sorace, the difficulty for adult learners to reach native language competence is due to the fact that these domains cannot interact properly. In the process of forming a sentence, different domains have to interact with each other. However, because of lack of automaticity, different domains cannot be integrated and coordinated with each other, which leads to problems.

One piece of evidence in support of the integration issue in adult L2 acquisition is problems caused by the third person singular *-s* and the past tense *-ed* for English learners like Chinese-speaking learners of English. In the past, people claim that Chinese-speaking learners of English can never acquire the third person singular marking and the past tense marking *-ed* because of the critical period. After the critical period, adult Chinese-speaking learners can never acquire the agreement marking, nor tense marking, because Chinese does not have agreement marking and tense marking. Nevertheless, according to a Mapping Hypothesis, Chinese people do have the knowledge of the third person singular marking and past tense marking. They know the past and they know the present. The problem is due to the fact that they are unable to map the agreement and the tense onto the verb with the required morpheme *-ed* or *-s*. So the problem is resulted from the mapping problem between morphology and syntax. If Chinese-speaking learners of English are asked to fill the blanks, the accuracy is very high. But if Chinese people are asked to have simultaneous communication or natural communication in English, they will miss the third person singular *-s* and the past tense *-ed* very frequently. So, that means if they have sufficient time, they can connect morphology with syntax. However, if they are under time pressure, they will not be able to connect the two domains. L2 learners have processing difficulties in integrating and coordinating different types of information pertaining to different domains. This is a breakthrough in linguistic theory as well as in explaining difficulties for learners like Chinese-speaking or Japanese-speaking learners of English, where their first language does not have tense marking or agreement marking. This theory makes a significant contribution to the understanding of L2 acquisition, and that is why it is important.

Could you share with us some of the most interesting findings from your previous research regarding interfaces in SLA?

One of my studies investigated English speakers' second language acquisition of Chinese *wh*-topicalization at the syntax-discourse interface. The *wh*-word has to move to the sentence initial position in *wh*-questions in English, whereas *wh*-words normally stay in situ in Chinese. However, some of the Chinese sentences do allow the *wh*-word to move to the sentence initial position. For example, we can say (1), but we can't say (2). However, in a certain situation, we can say (3) and we can also say (4). This shows that *wh*-words in this particular sentence can either stay in situ or can move to the sentence initial position. Then what is the difference between these four sentences? When people say "*Shenme cai ni mei chi*", the phrase *shenme cai* "what dish(es)" is linked to a list of dishes known to the speaker and the listener. For example, we went out for dinner yesterday. After coming back, everyone got food poisoned except for you, then I asked you *zuotian wanshang shenme cai ni mei chi* "what dish(es) did you not

eat yesterday”. In this situation, both the speaker and the listener know that there was a set of dishes on the table, so *shenme cai* “what dishes” is linked to the previous discourse. The above examples show that only the discourse-linked *wh*-word can appear in the sentence initial position, while non-discourse-linked *wh*-words cannot be moved to the sentence initial position. In contrast, the *wh*-word is fronted to the sentence initial position in English *wh*-questions. For English-speaking learners of Chinese, making distinctions between discourse-linked *wh*-words and non-discourse-linked *wh*-words is a big challenge. My finding shows that English-speaking learners have difficulty in making decisions about which *wh*-word can be fronted and which *wh*-word cannot.

- (1) “你吃什么?”
You eat what
What do you eat?
- (2) * “什么你吃?”
What you eat
What do you eat?
- (3) “什么菜你没吃?”
What dish(es) you didn't eat
What dish(es) did you not eat?
- (4) “你没吃什么菜?”
You didn't eat what dish(es)
What dish(es) did you not eat?

The acquisition of new and additional grammatical features has been a hot topic for discussion. In your view, how are new and additional features acquired in adult second language acquisition?

Whether a new feature or an additional feature can be acquired by second language learners or third language learners depends very much on the availability of positive evidence in the input. This involves the quantity of the positive evidence in the input, as well as the quality of the possible evidence in the input. By quantity, it means how frequent new features will be in the input, which can tell the learner that this is a new feature or an additional feature. By quality, it refers to whether this evidence in the input is obvious and salient and can tell the learner the feature is required for the target language. However, the positive evidence is not always robust and clear enough to send a signal to the learner. For example, when English-speaking learners learn Chinese, they can tell the plural meaning of the plural marking *-men*, but they cannot tell that *-men* also indicates definiteness from the phrases *xueshengmen* “the students” or *laoshimen* “the teachers”. This [definite] feature is hidden behind the plural marking, so this feature is not salient. If we do the analysis, the plural marking is very obvious. And this plural marking *-men* can only attach to human nouns, which is probably relatively obvious because they can't say *chabeimen* “the cups”, *jisuanjimen* “the computers”, or *qichemen* “the cars”. They can probably detect the [animate] feature, but it's very difficult for learners to detect the feature of definiteness. How new features or additional features are acquired very much depends on the type of features, the availability of the features, and also the quantity and quality of the features available in the input. It's very complicated, but this is one of the focuses in my research.

According to the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (FRH), learners need to map and reconfigure the linguistic features encoded in L1 onto L2. What is your view of feature

reassembly and feature reconfiguration? And how does feature reassembly and feature reconfiguration work in second language acquisition?

I like this Feature Reassembly Hypothesis. There are many theories arguing that learner's difficulties are related to the unavailability of certain features in their first language. For example, the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH) proposed by Hawkins and Chan (1997) argues that if a particular feature is not available in learners' L1, this feature can no longer be acquired by the second language learners anymore. Coming back to the morpheme “-men”, English language has plural markings and also has the feature of definiteness. According to the FFFH, English-speaking learners of Chinese should not have problems of acquiring the feature of definiteness because this [definite] feature is available in English. However, according to the FRH, the difficulty is not whether the feature is available in learners' L1 or not. Instead, the difficulty is related to the learners' ability to reassemble these features. In English, the [definite] feature is mostly expressed in the article system, such as “the”. In Chinese, we don't have an article system. And the Chinese morpheme *-men* has this feature. So English-speaking learners learning Chinese have to reassemble the [definite] feature from the definite article “the” onto *-men*. According to FRH, this process leads to difficulty because it requires the learner to reconfigure this feature from one item in their L1 to another item in their L2. And this shows that the problem is not whether the feature is available in the L1 or not. The problem is whether learners are able to reassemble a particular feature from one item in their L1 onto another in the target language.

As you have mentioned, the availability of positive evidence in the input will significantly influence the acquisition of an additional feature. Your empirical studies have also identified other variables influencing successful second language acquisition, such as computational complexity and cross-linguistic influence. What implications do these findings have for teaching Chinese as a foreign language?

Second language acquisition (SLA) research can inform the teaching profession by identifying what is difficult and what is easy, and it can also inform the teaching profession of what is transferred and what is not transferred. For the easy part, teachers do not have to spend precious time in the classroom and can save the time for those aspects that SLA research has found difficult for learners to acquire. Thus, findings in SLA can enable teachers to allocate the precious time in the classroom more sensibly and more economically. Moreover, SLA research findings can also inform professionals working in related areas, such as textbook writers, syllabus designers, language testing people, etc. Those findings can inform them of what needs more attention in their teaching, in their design of syllabus, and in their writing of textbooks and what areas do not require lots of attention in their writing. In that way, the teaching can be informed by the language acquisition research. And this is what is happening in English language teaching. In this sense, second language acquisition is a kind of basic research, just like other research fields. For example, in the field of life science, people try to find what genes lead to the lung cancer and the changes in what genes result in the breast cancer or the lung cancer. So people target the particular genes. Once they have found potential genes which may lead to cancers, their findings can help the clinicians to pay more attention to these genes. And that can also be used for pharmaceutical companies to invent targeted medicines. They form an academic chain or technique chain. In language research, we can also work to find what language features lead to difficulties and what languages features will not lead to difficulties. And that can inform language teachers, textbook writers, and syllabus designers. In this way, we can have a systematic chain of research. That will make our profession healthy, scientific, and systematic.

In recent years, you have also paid attention to third language acquisition. How did you become interested in this area?

This is purely by coincidence. The world has become globalized. And with the cross-border mobility of people, not only do people speak two languages, more and more people can speak three or four languages. This has become a kind of eventuality, that is, people naturally learn a second, third, and fourth language. For language acquisition research, we should not only look at learners' first language as a potential source of transfer. We also have to look at what other languages learners have, in order to get a reliable and valid assessment of the learner. And in China, now universities and the Ministry of Education also encourage teachers to teach students not only a second language but also a third language. In what way we can identify possible influences from learners' L1 or L2 in their L3 acquisition is a challenging question in our research. We cannot have a blind eye and pretend that participants in our research only have their mother tongue in their mind, and we should not pretend that the target language is learners' second language. In Europe, many students have learned two languages before they come to learn Chinese. So we have to bear this in mind.

The source of transfer has been a focus in third language acquisition research. How do you identify the transfer effect? And what did your projects reveal about the transfer effect?

As third language learners have already acquired two languages in their mind, transfer definitely occurs. But we have to find what is the source of the transfer. Does the transfer come from the first language or second language or both? Does the transfer take place in a wholesale manner? That is, they transfer the whole L1 grammar to L3 or transfer the whole grammar of L2 into L3. Or do they transfer the grammatical features piece by piece in a non-holistic manner? And whether the transfer only comes from the L1 which is the strongest and most stable language, or in L3 the transfer comes from L2 because both L2 and L3 are acquired by learners as adults, and they may be stored in the same location in their brain. The knowledge of L2 and L3 is most likely to be conscious knowledge, whereas L1 is most likely to be subconscious knowledge or implicit knowledge. Another influencing factor of language transfer is the typological distance between languages. Some people argue that transfer only occurs between languages that are typologically close and transfer is less likely to occur between languages that are typologically distant. For example, in our project, Cantonese is typologically close to Mandarin, whereas English is typologically distant from Mandarin. And in L3 Mandarin, transfer is more likely to take place from Cantonese into Mandarin than from English into Mandarin. So we also have to look at the typological distance when we investigate the transfer effect. These are the factors we have to bear in mind when investigating transfer in L3 acquisition.

Our results are very preliminary. Initial investigations have found that the typological distance plays an important role in language transfer. And the transfer does not seem to occur in a wholesale manner. It depends on individual linguistic phenomenon. L3 research is a relatively young area and is waiting to be explored. We want to find a model with which we can explain L3 phenomenon. We need to do more research and collect data to prove or disprove what we hypothesize. We're still working on it.

How do you see the future of language acquisition research?

I think that the field of language acquisition has a very bright future. This field has become interdisciplinary. People will try to do research more precisely or more accurately by incorporating modern technology into language acquisition research. And particularly, people want to find the connection between language acquisition with human well-beings. For example, researchers are

investigating the linguistic features of people with aphasia and autism. So language acquisition is not just about learning the language. People want to use the language learning to look at how the human brain operates and whether the language acquisition or language research can detect problems that people with autism or people with aphasia have. Again, the interdisciplinary approach to language research in combination with human well-being is the future and the right direction. This is very challenging, but this is a new field. The field of arts and humanities should become interdisciplinary. Researchers should not just follow the old fashion. Instead, they should open their arms and embrace new development and new advancement in different fields.

Before the interview ends, could you give some advice to young researchers who are interested in research in second language acquisition? What qualities young researchers need to develop?

First, young researchers have to lay a solid foundation in linguistic theory. They have to look at syntax, semantics, even pragmatics or discourse, etc. Of course, young people who want to work on second language acquisition or third language acquisition have to know the acquisition theories, such as Feature Reassembly Hypothesis and Interface Hypothesis, and then they need to compare their results with these theories and see whether their data can confirm or disconfirm the existent theories. And research methodologies are very important as well. For example, young researchers have to know how to conduct an online self-paced reading experiment, an eye-tracking experiment, etc.

Another important skill is statistics. Language acquisition research involves empirical studies and requires the researcher to collect and analyze data. And how to do the analysis? We have to use the statistic software. When I was doing my research at Edinburg University, we learnt SPSS, but now people prefer to use R Statistics and mixed models effects.

The most important aspect for young people who want to enter this field is their determination, their passion, and their love of this field. Without passion, without love of this field, halfway through people may find it too difficult and may give it up. For research in L2 and L3 acquisition, it takes time. You have to learn theories of language acquisition, to design and redesign your experiment, and to test your instruments. You also have to beg people for coming to participate in your research. These are all challenging tasks. Once you have collected the data, you have to make sure your data are reliable. You have to do statistical analysis. It takes much longer time to do this kind of research than research which only requires time in thinking and writing. Some theoretical linguists don't have to do the field study and can produce research outcomes more quickly than people working in empirical studies. So for us, doing experimental research will take a long time. And the results may not come out as what we expect. Thus, young researchers have to understand the challenges in the field and must have passion and love for the field. And more importantly, young researchers have to have perseverance. When encountering difficulties and challenges, being a researcher, you have to persevere. Without perseverance, young researchers may stop or give up halfway through. These are the important qualities young researchers need to develop. And I think the most important part is one's determination, passion, devotion, and perseverance in the field. That's my advice.

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