Non-award language courses: Designing a Confucius Institute program for Mandarin Chinese

Abstract

This paper considers the differences between award and non-award courses for language study and shows how they were taken into account in the design of a non-award Confucius Institute program for Mandarin Chinese. The obvious difference is simply whether or not the course leads to an award but this affects the need for, and nature of, assessment and potentially also course content, learner motivation and expectations about class work, homework and attendance. The Mandarin non-award course was thus developed quite differently from typical award courses, especially in its focus on spoken Chinese with little teaching of the written language. The paper ends by considering two related matters, namely issues in the sequencing of language studies and the potential for offering non-award Mandarin programs online, making them available to learners in regional and remote areas throughout Australia.

1. Introduction

Non-award language classes are popular around the world, both onsite and online and yet little seems to have been written about how they work or might best be taught—we have found just two papers on the matter (Kawano and Black 2007; Yang 2005). More generally, non-award courses are an aspect of what Stickler and Emke (2011: 146) characterise as the “under-researched distinction between different levels of formality in language learning within and outside of institutions”.

This paper\(^1\) is concerned only with unregulated non-award courses for adults. In Australia, this excludes non-award courses (often on English) that comply with regulations required to be offered to international students (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2007)—our interest is in programs whose design is constrained only by the need to attract students. At the same time we wish to avoid discussing issues relating to children (such as community-run programs for children with a home language background), especially because attendance may be induced by parents rather than voluntary.

Since LCNAU is concerned with Australian universities, the reader may wonder how non-award courses relate to this concern. Some universities do, in fact, offer non-award courses, if not within their higher education programs, of course. The specific program discussed in this paper was developed for an Australian university, or specifically for its Confucius Institute, a non-profit Chinese-funded enterprise set

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\(^{1}\) The authors acknowledge the financial support of the Chinese Government for this project.
up “to promote Chinese language and culture in foreign countries”. Of over four hundred such institutes worldwide, 13 are hosted by Australian universities and almost all of these offer non-award courses for Mandarin Chinese. Confucius Institutes have been criticised for various reasons, including limiting their language concerns to standard Mandarin (Putonghua) written in the simplified characters used in the People’s Republic of China (Churchman 2011)—not a surprising limitation in view of the source of funding—but the design of their language programs is otherwise unconstrained, as the present paper will suggest.

Some Australian universities also offer non-award language courses within continuing education programs. As examples, in such a program, the University of Sydney offers 19 languages, the Australian National University offers 14 and the University of Adelaide offers 10. While it may now be somewhat more common for Australian universities to simply open their higher education language programs to non-award students, as for example at Macquarie University and Deakin University, this practice begs the question considered in the present paper: what makes the difference between this and running specially designed non-award courses instead?

A second reason why this paper is relevant to Australian universities is because they are in the midst of change, so that there may be room to consider whether higher education has anything to learn from non-award courses. An obvious recent change has been the move to online learning, from nothing at all twenty years ago to online support and often full offerings for a majority of subjects at such universities as Charles Darwin University (CDU). Possible directions for the future are suggested by a worldwide ‘Open Courseware’ movement led by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and within Australia, involving the University of Southern Queensland (see e.g. Taylor 2007). These efforts are working towards making course material freely available online for self study, with the possibility of university credit being awarded through a separate assessment process, for which a fee would be charged. Making assessment independent from any particular course of study, as also advocated by competency-based training and as sometimes implemented through recognition of prior learning, would remove the most significant difference between award and non-award courses, allowing university credit to be based on whatever approaches to study students found most effective.

After considering the special characteristics of non-award courses (Section 2), we describe what was involved in the development of a non-award course for Mandarin Chinese delivered by the Confucius Institute of CDU in 2013 (Section 3). This involved developing goals likely to attract learners and then choosing teaching approaches and resource materials to suit. While this particular course was developed to proceed sequentially, we also consider possibilities for non-sequential courses to suit particular interests, as well as possibilities for online courses.

2. Differences between award and non-award courses

Non-award courses seem to be near the border between formal learning and the ‘blurry’ area of non-formal learning (see Werquin 2007: 3-6). They would be regarded
as non-formal by some (e.g. Benson 2011: 10) but not under such other definitions as that of European Commission’s (2001: 32-33), since they can be offered by an educational institution. Certainly they are more formal than learning opportunities provided by such activities as a Chinese conversation corner held at our local Confucius Institute.

Table 1: Differences between award and non-award language courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Award (higher education or VET [vocational education and training]) course</th>
<th>Non-award course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Outcome</td>
<td>An award certifying learning</td>
<td>The learning experience alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Accreditation</td>
<td>Required</td>
<td>Not required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Assessment</td>
<td>Assessed for academic credit</td>
<td>Any assessment is only to help the teacher and learners evaluate learner progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Goals</td>
<td>Set goals, typically comprehensive communicative competence</td>
<td>Can be designed and flexibly modified to suit learner interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Motivation</td>
<td>Achievement of goals, the learning itself, enjoyment of study, and/or obtaining credit</td>
<td>Achievement of goals, the learning itself, and/or enjoyment of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Homework</td>
<td>Usually vital to pass assessments</td>
<td>Only if the student wishes to do it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Classroom study</td>
<td>Valuable to provide guidance, clarification and practice</td>
<td>Vital for introducing and providing practice on all matters covered in the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Attendance</td>
<td>May be required, and in any case it is up to the student to study to make up for any absences</td>
<td>As the student desires. Teaching should promote attendance and be flexible enough to allow for occasional absences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Teaching</td>
<td>Teachers normally have some qualifications</td>
<td>No guarantee of teaching quality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The obvious difference between award and non-award courses is simply that the former lead to some sort of qualification whereas the latter do not but this can have other repercussions, as summarised in Table 1. One important difference to any Australian provider of a non-award course is that it does not require the tedious accreditation process that award courses do. While such accreditation can allow the course to be supported by government funding, thus reducing costs to students, this need not make a non-award equivalent more expensive. For example, forty hours of the Chinese non-award course discussed in Section 3 was in fact offered to learners for much less than what they would have paid for a Commonwealth-supported place in a 48-hour unit in a higher education program for the language.

Another major difference is that a non-award course need not assess students to see if they qualify for an award. Any assessment is solely to give the teacher and/or learners an idea of learner needs (diagnostic assessment) and progress. For
those purposes it need not be exhaustive or detailed; even the ability of students to understand and interact with the language in the classroom may be sufficient to provide gratifying evidence of progress.

This does not mean that the program should not have clear learning objectives, if only to attract learners to the program. The big difference between award and non-award courses is for what Houle (1961: 15-16) calls goal-orientated learners, who “use education to accomplish fairly clear-cut objectives”. For an award course an objective could be the award itself but for a non-award course it could only be the learning objectives or whatever else the course leads to. For Houle’s learning-orientated students, who seek knowledge for its own sake, on the other hand, there may be little difference between award and non-award courses.

Houle (1961: 15-16) also distinguishes activity-orientated learners, who are difficult to plan for because what they seek may have “no necessary connection... with... the announced purposes of the activity”. Some may take such courses simply as enjoyable social activities, as ‘recreational’ language courses. This is not a problem if the learning activities are designed to be enjoyable even for students who are serious about learning. We have also heard anecdotally of people who take non-award course as a way of meeting people to date, or even a prospective life partner and who may drop out after the first meeting if they see no likely prospects but we see no realistic way of catering for such interests.

The selection of learning objectives for a non-award course can be more flexible than for accredited courses, since accrediting bodies tend to have certain expectations about language programs, such as that they will deal with both written and spoken language. Such considerations need not apply to non-award courses, however, which can thus cater for people who are keen to be able to use spoken Chinese for everyday purposes without the burden of mastering Chinese characters. Such matters can even be decided after the course has begun. For example, one teacher of non-award courses for Japanese normally starts by asking her students whether or not they want to learn to write Japanese as well as speak it and then she develops her program accordingly (Kawano and Black 2007). Thus, non-award courses have a better chance of approximating Carl Rogers’ ideal (1969, cited in Stickler and Emke 2011: 149) that “learning needs to come from the students” demand rather than from curriculum and content presented by the teacher.

Another repercussion is that it may be difficult to require homework or other study outside of class, since there is no assessment to be affected by a student’s failure to study. It may be possible to negotiate homework with well-motivated learners, as Yang (2005) was able to do for a non-credit course for English but some busy adult learners may expect all learning to take place within the classes that they are paying for. Accordingly, course designers are generally wisest to ensure that class activities cover everything needed to continue and progress in the study so that nothing in class depends on what learners may have studied outside of class.

Similarly there is no way to enforce attendance in a non-award program. To sustain attendance and the future of the program more generally, the content and
teaching should be attractive, with activities that are both enjoyable and effective. Even so, since busy adults sometimes miss even the most appealing classes, the program should be flexible enough to allow learners to continue without difficulty despite occasional absences (see Section 3.2 for a suggestion about this).

Finally, unregulated courses can more easily get away with employing poorly-qualified and inexperienced teachers, hoping that prospective students will not notice. From anecdotal evidence we understand that Mandarin has even been taught in Australian non-award courses with no attention to tones. One can only hope that programs providing quality teaching would be more competitive and help destroy the market for poor practice. In Japan, English conversation schools (eikaiwa) have been notorious for hiring teachers whose main qualifications are blue eyes and blond hair, a practice that Joe (2012) describes as having ruined the industry (in addition to whatever effects might be attributed to the economic downturn in the 1990s). At the same time, quality teaching is not entirely guaranteed by regulation—even university lecturers sometimes have no formal teaching qualification and little experience in teaching the languages they teach.

3. Designing a non-award course for Mandarin Chinese

In designing a non-award course it is especially important to start by considering the goals of the program—what learners should learn from it—and to work out how to accomplish them. In advocating such an approach, Wiggins and McTighe (2005) call it ‘backward design’ in contrast to one that begins by starting with the activities or materials and developing the goals from them. While ‘backward design’ may always be useful, the latter approach is certainly feasible where available materials support well-established goals. For example, it was easy to base CDU’s three-year higher education program in Mandarin on the first three volumes of the widely used textbook *New Practical Chinese Reader* (2002) and let the content of these textbooks determine the expected learning outcomes for each level of the program.

Here we do not follow Wiggins and McTighe’s (2005) plan exactly, since they consider issues of assessment that do not play a major role in non-award courses; we simply move from the goals to considering possible learning activities and then what sort of learning materials might back them up. The process is not strictly linear, since the characteristics of readily-available materials can make some learning activities more or less feasible which, in turn, may lead one to reconsider some of the goals. Thus the process can actually move in either direction as plans are refined.

3.1 Goals

There are various sorts of courses that might attract Chinese learners and in Section 3.4 we consider some additional options. However, the course actually developed for the Confucius Institute was a general, multi-level program designed to progressively improve learner ability to interact in spoken Mandarin for a variety of everyday purposes, such as meeting people, making friends, finding one’s way around, buying
things and ultimately making arrangements for such things as meals, transportation and accommodation. It was also designed to introduce learners to a small number of Chinese characters most likely to be encountered in the daily environment, such as those relating to prices, distinguishing men’s from women’s toilets and the like, but it did not intend to build significant competence in the written language.

A focus on spoken Chinese but not writing flies in the face of a common assumption that language learners should become literate as well as orally fluent. Certainly, an English language program would not neglect the written language, whatever the difficulties of English spelling. Most Chinese textbooks produced in China similarly assume that learners are learning to read and write as they learn to speak and understand—a notable exception is a program by Zhang (2001). We have even observed one Chinese lecturer telling a class that learning Chinese characters is essential to learning the spoken language. At the same time, however, we are aware of Australians who are keen to learn spoken Chinese but despair at the need to memorise hundreds of characters and certainly the latter is not necessary to accomplish many everyday purposes in Chinese. We view the non-award course as an opportunity to cater to such interests, given that those who are keen for a more comprehensive study of the language could enrol in an existing award course that provides this.

More generally there is an advantage in teaching spoken and written language together because the two can reinforce each other, so that learners can absorb the language visually as well as through hearing and articulation. For Chinese this does not require learning Chinese characters, however, since the spoken language is even better represented in pinyin, an alphabetical system of transcription widely used in mainland China. This system is valuable not only for showing pronunciation, but also as a basis for accessing dictionaries and for inputting characters into computers. Accordingly we took the goals of the beginners-level course to include coverage of pinyin and being able to pronounce anything written in it, thus covering the whole of the Mandarin sound system. This is not to say that pinyin and pronunciation should be taught in isolation; instead they can be developed as learners encounter the sounds of Mandarin through learning basic conversational interaction, such as greetings and introductions.

The course was advertised as devoted to the spoken language but in the first class the eight students were given a brief questionnaire about their interests. Questionnaire results confirmed that they were interested in spoken Mandarin but also that they wanted to learn at least a little about Chinese writing. Accordingly, some time was devoted to the nature of Chinese characters and how they were written with particular types of strokes in particular orders. The flexibility of non-award courses allows for such variation.

We conceptualised higher levels of the program as continuing to expand the things that learners could do in spoken Mandarin, gradually introducing the relevant vocabulary and grammatical constructions and continuing to reinforce proper pronunciation. To develop a program for this, however, we decided to let the details
depend on what learning materials we could find to provide a good coverage of practical spoken interaction (see Section 3.3).

3.2 Learning activities

Following a pattern not uncommon to non-award language programs, the course was developed to run over a number of levels, each level being taught over ten weeks in weekly two-hour evening classes. The ten weeks were chosen to correspond to public school terms, for the convenience of parents who may wish to travel while their children are on breaks from school.

Since the course was to focus on spoken Mandarin, the teaching approach attempted to maximise the learners’ exposure to the spoken language and provide them with ample opportunity to practise it. The lecturer thus taught the course largely in Mandarin, sometimes using props or other cues to make the meanings clear and occasionally adding English glosses or explanation when this was the easier thing to do. Having demonstrated a conversational pattern, such as a greeting, she would then get students to practise it with her and then with each other. At times she would also run interactive activities, such as having learners interview each other in Mandarin in order to elicit personal information (e.g. age and birth date or preferences in food and drink), after which learners would each report what they had learned in Mandarin to the class as a whole.

Learners were thus constantly engaged in trying to understand what the teacher was saying and to replicate it themselves. A ten minute break between each of the two hours was important to give learners a chance to relax and refresh themselves.

As normal practice, the teacher introduced patterns of interaction entirely orally, backed up by actions and occasionally by props. Only later did she recycle and reinforce the learning by using Powerpoint to also present them in written form, generally both in pinyin transcription and in Chinese characters, whether or not the learners cared to pay attention to the latter. These Powerpoint presentations also provided English translations of relatively new material but not of that already familiar to the learners. The presentations were also used to highlight grammatical patterns that had already been introduced in the spoken interaction and the beginners level also included some demonstration and explanation of pinyin transcription. As noted in 3.1, there was also some demonstration of how to write Chinese characters.

Also, as normal practice, each class subsequent to the first began by revising interaction introduced the preceding week before going on to develop it further. To use a Chinese simile, xiàng gǔn xuě qiú yí yàng, it was ‘just like rolling a snowball’. That is, the class kept coming around again to earlier material but adding another layer of language each time, such as by recycling numbers for ages, dates, times, prices and so on.

In practising a language, no learner should be left uncertain of what to do, even after forgetting or missing the preceding week’s lesson—they should always have enough scaffolding to proceed, whether from hearing other learners or from written
materials to back up interactive tasks. There should then be no need for better prepared students to wait on slower ones while getting useful practice, whether they care to use the available scaffolding or not.

### 3.3 Learning materials

It is possible to teach a language without using any set text or other sorts of materials and a Japanese course described by Kawano and Black (2007) took this approach to save learners from investing in a costly book that they may not fully utilise. For the Mandarin program, however, we thought it desirable for learners to have set materials that could aid their memories and to allow them to continue and extend their study at home if they cared to, especially if we could identify low-cost materials. For this purpose audio-visual materials are vital and all of those discussed below are accompanied by CDs at the very least.

Initially, we considered basing the non-award program on the same text used for our university’s higher education program, namely the *New Practical Chinese Reader* (2002, partly available in a new edition). This could have worked for initial levels, especially if supplemented with additional material on practical everyday interaction (see Chen and Black 2012 for a critique), but by the second half of the first volume the lesson material is no longer useful for a course on spoken Mandarin because it begins to assume knowledge of Chinese characters.

Instead, for the beginners-level course we ended up using the ‘threshold’ level of *Road to Success* (2008), whose eight levels of topics suited the ten-week program. However, much of the overly extensive explanation of pronunciation was simply ignored in favour of demonstrating proper pronunciation instead.

During this time we were also learning more about the *Great Wall Chinese* online material, to which we were fortunate to be given special access. We found the online version valuable, with dialogues spoken by cartoon characters in fluent Mandarin, as well as a variety of notes and exercises. We decided to use this as the basis for a second level course, and since the cost of a single level is not high—about A$30 for three months—we asked those taking the course to subscribe to it. This multimedia course provides a range of options and, while it does not depend on learning Chinese characters, it does present materials in characters as an option and even provides exercises on them for those who may be interested.

Since the classroom used for our non-award course had internet access, the teacher was able to demonstrate the use of these materials in class. However, the only parts she used regularly in class were the dialogues, initially played without the optional written versions or translations. The pace and pronunciation of the material is natural enough to challenge learners who had not studied them at home, although after several repetitions they were increasingly able to replicate the exchanges.

Ultimately the *Great Wall Chinese* online materials will have three main parts, of which at least the first, called ‘Essentials of Communication’, seems to be complete. This part consists of six levels, each with ten units, and under non-award conditions
it seems that a unit might be comfortably covered in about four hours of class time. Accordingly the existing materials could support as much as three years of study consisting of four 20-hour levels (e.g. two hours per week for 10 weeks) each year.

One weakness of the Great Wall Chinese materials is that they only illustrate pinyin transcription, without providing a solid and systematic introduction to it. While the materials could be a valuable basis for even the lowest, beginners level of our non-award program, they would certainly need to be supplemented by further materials on pinyin.

A second weakness is that the content of Great Wall Chinese is not as well-focussed on the practical purposes of daily life in China as we might like for our non-award program. The material is certainly interesting, ultimately developing four separate stories involving the characters, such as one American girl’s quest to find someone who knew her Chinese grandmother. By the same token, it does not move quickly to cover various practical concerns. For example, Unit 6 of the beginners level covers such attributes of people as whether they are tall or short. Perhaps this is done to demonstrate the use of adjectives but for our practical purposes this might better be done in terms of shopping, such as whether clothes were too big or small or expensive.

For a better coverage of the needs of daily life we considered Experiencing Chinese: Living in China (2006) and other texts in the same series. However, these tend to introduce content at a rate that would need to be slowed considerably for a non-award course. For example, the twelve lessons of that particular text are supposed to be covered in about forty to fifty hours, but by the third lesson, and thus presumably after about eight hours of instruction, learners are already studying how to negotiate purchases of both vegetables and clothing. While the specific dialogues they study should give them a start on doing this, one would expect that it would take much more time to become familiar with the variations they are likely to encounter when actually attempting such purchases. In any case we will consider these particular materials further in the following section.

3.4 Issues of sequencing

A common approach to language course design is for successive levels to be offered in sequence, with each higher level building on the ones that preceded it. There is an alternative possibility, namely to have classes on different uses of language, such as for shopping, travelling and dining and to design them so that they do not depend on each other and thus can be taken in any order. An example of such a text for Japanese is Japanese in Modules, whose ten modules were “constructed in such a way that students can choose any module in any order, according to their needs” (Conveney, Takayashiki and Honma (1993: 8).

How feasible such an approach may be for Chinese depends heavily on what learning materials are available or else can be created especially for such classes. Existing materials often assume prior knowledge and sequencing, although there
may be some exceptions. Some of the *Experiencing Chinese* materials published by Higher Education Press are at least ambiguous with regard to sequencing. For example, while *Experiencing Chinese: Living in China* (2006) may seem somewhat more basic than *Experiencing Chinese: Travelling in China* (2006), the latter does not seem to depend on having mastered the former.

Both texts do, however, introduce substantial content fairly quickly, as noted in Section 3.3. Accordingly they would more easily be studied after a beginners-level class that provided solid foundations in Chinese pronunciation and such basic interactions as greetings, questions, requests, suggestions, invitations and appropriate responses. After such a beginners’ course it may be possible for learners to study further topics in any order, with each such course covering the particular text types (genres), grammar and vocabulary needed for particular tasks, such as buying vegetables in a market or ordering food in a restaurant. To the extent that grammar and vocabulary were repeated across the different courses, this could be seen as useful recycling.

This is a matter of some practical importance for the design of non-award courses, whether or not also for award courses. For example, Australian business people may well want to acquire some ability to use Chinese for business purposes and naturally they may want to do this in the most straightforward manner. While they may thus prefer a business Chinese course with no prerequisites, we believe that they had best start with a general beginners’ course covering the same basics useful to learners with other interests in Chinese. But of course they might still want to move on to a course specifically on business Chinese as soon as possible. How soon that could be depends on either finding or creating appropriate learning materials.

### 3.5 Planning for online delivery

A special focus of our Institute is supposed to be the online delivery of non-award courses, which would make programs offered by a prestigious organisation at an Australian university available to people outside of urban areas, not only in the Northern Territory, but throughout Australia. It has not yet attempted to develop such online courses but this could easily be done along the same lines we used for the online higher education Chinese program at CDU. This uses the Blackboard platform to provide course materials and virtual classroom facilities, the latter most recently known as Blackboard Collaborate. The virtual classrooms not only allow audio and (if desired) video interaction among teacher and students but also a choice of using a virtual whiteboard, uploaded Powerpoint presentations and/or access to either web-based material or programs running on the teacher’s computer.

Online delivery can in theory be as flexible and changeable as classroom delivery. However, minimising the need to change and update the materials would save effort and allow a set program (perhaps with some options) to be made available to learners in at least outline form at the beginning of the level. Supporting documents, such as any handouts, sound files, and Powerpoint presentations, could also be added at any point, and it would be sensible and economical to retain them for each new group of
students taking the same level. A further advantage of online delivery is that virtual class sessions can be recorded and thus remain accessible to those who were not able to attend the class when it was actually offered.

4. Conclusion

This paper has explored the differences between award and non-award courses and considered what these have meant for the development of a non-award course in spoken Mandarin Chinese designed for the Confucius Institute of CDU. Our paper has focussed on a series of practical issues (in this case most relevant to Mandarin) that university language teachers might need to consider if they are planning to introduce non-credit bearing courses for a broader public. We also hope it is clear that nothing prevents non-award courses from being designed and taught as well or better than award courses, even though they are constrained only by the need to attract students (and so succeed in the marketplace), rather than by any sort of accreditation process (to whatever extent that can ensure quality). They also have a special advantage in their ability to cater to the special interests of specific learners, such as those requiring basic Chinese for travel to China. What they lack is providing that ‘piece of paper’ to certify the learning that took place, which may, of course, be of crucial importance to learners in some circumstances. At the same time, if a coming trend is for such certification to be provided through assessment processes separate from course delivery—as noted in the introduction—this lack could eventually become insignificant.

Notes

1. Our thanks to Dr Richard Curtis for presenting our poster at the 2013 LCNAU Colloquium, to him and Dr Mikiko Kawano for various suggestions on drafts, to Prof. Phillip Benson for suggesting a reference and to anonymous reviewers for pointing out matters requiring clarification.


5. See http://www.greatwallchinese.cn/portal.do. Apparently the Confucius Institute at Griffith University also uses these materials; see http://www.griffith. edu.au/tourism-confucius-institute/programs-courses/language-courses.

References


