

From Task-Based to Story-Based Language Learning:  
Teaching Beginning Mandarin through Dramatizations of Chinese Fables

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A growing body of scholarship demonstrates that traditional task-based approaches to language learning may be fruitfully enhanced by conversation- and performance-based activities that have potential to transform even relatively simple tasks into creative, collaborative experiences that are both effective means of language acquisition and use and enriching encounters with a new and seemingly remote culture (Christensen & Warnick, 2010; Doughty & Long, 2003; Ellis, 2003; Long, 2000; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 2003; Walker, 2010; Walker & Noda, 2010). These approaches are complementary rather than competing, and together they challenge teachers to develop authentic and meaningful tasks, to provide opportunities for creativity and collaboration, and to engage a wide range of support activities and resources to enhance the total learning experience (Lai & Li, 2011).

We have sought to engage these challenges with dramatizations of ancient Chinese fables in a beginning course in Mandarin Chinese, starting with the selection of some fables appropriate for dramatization and potentially engaging for students, offering preparation in the form of relevant task-based activities, and ending with the dramatic performances in class before an audience of native Chinese speakers. This approach, which we call for simplicity *story-based*, requires careful sequencing from the selection of stories to the formulation of tasks to the dramatization of the stories—hence stories to tasks to stories. It emphasizes three essential elements: (1) the use of threads to connect simple initial tasks to the culminating dramatic experience; (2) a broad use of

vocabulary and expression that draws on the depth and breadth of Chinese culture; and (3) an opportunity for students to engage that culture directly and personally, through creative dialogue, collaboration, and improvisation.

Task-based learning sets a trajectory that leads naturally to conversation- and performance-based activities. Story-based dramatizations add a broad and rich cultural dimension by drawing on the historical and literary resources within a given culture, in our case, Mandarin Chinese. A story-based approach is grounded in an understanding of narratives as specific and general, situated and schematic—an understanding well documented in both social psychology and narrative theory (Assmann, 2010; Bartlett, 1932; Propp, 1968; Straub, 2010; Wertsch, 2002). Narratives or stories are specific when they are situated in particular settings (times and places) populated with specific characters and events, general when they are unsituated schematic frameworks lacking these details (Wertsch, 2002, pp. 57-62). Chinese fables, like other narratives, may be at once specific and general, historically situated in specific characters and events but also illustrative of general cultural patterns and beliefs. In our classroom dramatizations, we used the fables as schematic frameworks within which students could generate their own dialogue, based primarily on their previous task-based conversations, thus engaging in their own creative way with Chinese culture and history. In the process, we also observed their translation of a traditional fable from one schematic framework to another—thus adapting it to their own cultural heritage.

Our story-based approach required thorough preparation, beginning with both in-class teacher-directed and independent practice in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation and simple task-based exercises, such as introductions and information exchanges, and extending to the use of computer-based technologies and collaborative

learning activities. Beyond the initial preparations, computer-based technologies, such as texting, Tweeting, and YouTube conversational videos, and collaborative social activities, such as a Mandarin Corner, provided opportunities for additional in-class and out-of-class interactions between instructors and students and also for collaborations and improvisational exchanges between our Mandarin students and native Mandarin-speaking students who volunteered their assistance. We engaged all of these activities and resources to prepare students for their dramatic reenactments of the Chinese fables.

### Task-Based and Performance-Based Language Learning

Task-based approaches have long been the bedrock of language learning and teaching and lead naturally to conversation- and performance-based approaches. Task-based approaches emphasize the holistic use of language to fulfill nonlinguistic goals with a primary focus on meaning (Ellis, 2003, pp. 2-16; Lai & Li, 2011, pp. 500-501; Nunan, 2004, pp. 1-4) These approaches identify a variety of types of task-oriented activities, most commonly information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap activities, further elaborated as jigsaw, information-gap, problem-solving, decision-making, and opinion-exchange activities (Ellis, 2003, pp. 210-216; Nunan, 2004, pp. 56-64). These activities are guided by carefully articulated frameworks and principles that are nonetheless flexible enough to accommodate a range of local pedagogical practices (Doughty & Long, 2003, pp. 51-53; Ellis, 2003, pp. 206-210; Long, 2000, pp. 186-188; Nunan, 2004, pp. 35-38). According to Long (2000, pp. 186-188), a basic framework for task-based language learning and teaching proceeds from (1) an analysis of target tasks to (2) a classification of types of target tasks to (3) the development of pedagogic tasks and (4) a task syllabus to (5) implementation, (6) assessment of student achievement, and (7) evaluation of the task-based program. Thus, for example, the target task of

making a hotel reservation might be classified as making reservations in general, and corresponding pedagogic tasks might include intensive listening practice or role-playing the parts of reservation clerks and their customers. These pedagogic tasks, of course, may vary with local conditions such as learners' age or proficiency level. Of particular note for our present purposes, the guiding principles of such an approach include the focus on form (as opposed to forms), that is, the uses of language in context; respect for learners' own developmental processes; the potential for collaborative learning; and the opportunity for individualized instruction (Doughty & Long, 2003, pp. 51-52; Long 2000, pp. 184-186).

The contextual and collaborative principles guiding task-based learning and teaching lead naturally to sociocultural approaches that place increased emphasis on the conversation and performance dimensions of language acquisition and use (Ellis, 2003; Christensen and Warnick, 2010; Ren and Wainwright, 2007; Walker, 2010; Walker & Noda, 2010; Yang, 1993). Thus Ellis (2003, pp. 175-203), for example, shows how sociocultural approaches distinguish tasks from activities that encompass collaborative conversations. Sociocultural approaches emphasize learners' motives and goals and seek thereby to account for the processes by which a task may be transformed into different kinds of activities on the basis of learners' differing motives and goals (pp. 183-184). Thus even a relatively simple picture-description task, for example, may become an occasion for merely naming the objects in the picture, relating the picture to the learner's own personal experience, or describing the people and the activities displayed in the picture (pp. 185-187). These processes of transformation—from tasks to differentially motivated activities—encompass the traditional notion of scaffolding, renamed “*collaborative dialogue*” or “*instructional conversation*” and explained as the

dialogic processes by which one speaker or writer assists another in the performance of some function or task (pp. 180-183, 191-195). In a similar vein, Walker (2010), Walker and Noda (2010), and Christensen and Warnick (2010) emphasize the performance dimensions of language acquisition and use. Building on the integral relationship between language and culture, Walker (2010) explains language learning as an act of engaging in “performed culture,” taking performance to mean “observable behavior,” “situated knowledge,” a “‘bringing to completion’ or ‘accomplishing’” and taking culture to encompass “achievement culture,” “informational culture,” and “behavioral culture” but emphasizing behavioral culture, especially for beginning learners (pp. 7-8, 13-14). By Walker’s (2010) account, achievement culture is represented by “the hallmarks of a civilization,” informational culture by “the kinds of information a society values,” behavioral culture by “the knowledge that enables a person to navigate daily life” (pp. 13-14). Behavioral culture is situated in a specified place and time, with a specified script and rules, appropriate speaker roles, and predictable audience reactions (pp. 15-16). According to Walker and Noda (2010), behavioral culture is captured in stories as the basic unit of analysis and in compilations of stories into “cases” and “sagas”—collections or series of stories about activities, such as various ways of greeting people (cases) and collections of stories about people and places (sagas) (pp. 40-43). Behavioral culture, in this sense, is readily amenable to language learning through dramatic performances (Ren & Wainwright, 2007; Yang, 1993). Our concept of stories, in contrast, transcends behavioral culture and encompasses also achievement and informational culture—not only the cultural customs and conventions operational in daily life but a cultural heritage as a whole, its history and its literature, its values and beliefs.

## Story-Based Language Learning

Our story-based approach builds on task-based and conversation- and performance-based approaches to incorporate these broader cultural understandings and values as a significant component in Mandarin language learning, even for beginning students. Steele (2000) notes what he perceives to be a tendency in language teaching to emphasize the surface features of culture, knowledge about its readily observable facts or features as opposed to an empathic understanding of the underlying framework of attitudes that gives those facts their meanings (pp. 199-202). A story-based approach to language learning encompasses both surface and deep structure—both specific characters, settings, events, and plots and also the frameworks or patterns of belief and value that motivate the characters, shape the plots, and give them substance and meaning. Our implementation of a story-based approach—from stories to tasks to stories—does not seek merely to study another culture and its stories, however, but to bring those stories to life through creative, improvisational dramatizations. This approach has deep roots and a long history, beginning with studies of individual and collective memory in social psychology and developing into a coherent theory of narrative (Assmann, 2010; Bartlett, 1932; Propp, 1968; Straub, 2010; Wertsch, 2002).

Bartlett (1932) provides the conceptual underpinnings of the theory in his experimental studies of the workings of individual and collective memory (Straub, 2010, pp. 221-222; Wertsch, 2002, pp. 61-62). In one of many series of experiments, Bartlett (1932) asked subjects to reproduce a strange and unfamiliar North American folk tale, “The War of the Ghosts,” shortly after hearing it for the first time and at irregular intervals thereafter (pp. 64-66). The most striking characteristic of these reproductions was “the persistence, for any given subject, of the ‘form’ of his [or her] first

reproduction” (p. 83). This “general scheme, form, order and arrangement of material” persisted, along with a few dominant details, despite rapid transformation and rearrangement of other details (p. 83). Bartlett (1932) attributes this process of remembering to each subject’s “*effort after meaning*,” that is, the effort to derive the maximum possible meaning from the story consistent with the subject’s “pre-formed setting, scheme, or pattern . . . utilized in a completely unreflecting, unanalytical, and unwitting manner” (pp. 44-45, 84-85). Wertsch (2002) develops these insights into a generalized theory of narrative as a cultural tool of “textually mediated collective memory” (p. 55). As cultural tools, narratives operate at two levels, specific and general, that is, as both “specific narratives” and “schematic narrative templates” (p. 60). Specific narratives are narratives with specific characters, settings, and events. In contrast, schematic narrative templates are more generalized abstract forms. These narrative templates are not “some sort of universal archetypes” but rather “particular narrative traditions that can be expected to differ from one cultural setting to another” (p. 62). They are not, however, “readily available to consciousness” (p. 62).

Since these narrative templates are culture specific, they may or may not translate readily from one culture to another—an issue of considerable importance for language learning. Some recent studies maintain that cultural memories are grounded in particular cultures and individual and social identities and for this reason may not translate readily across cultures (Assmann, 2010, pp. 112-114; Straub, 2010, pp. 220-222, 226-227). According to Straub (2010), “What our memory absorbs and preserves are not ‘bare, objective facts,’ and memory itself is by no means a ‘mirror of nature.’ Rather, it encodes and stores things which have already been perceived and received beforehand in the light of available representational modi (terms and concepts,

schemata and scripts) as well as symbolic forms” (p. 226). As a consequence, “a person recollecting past events imagines and narrates them as a member of a certain culture” (p. 227). Assmann (2010) similarly argues that “cultural memory reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as ‘ours’” (p. 113). Assmann (2010) maintains, moreover, that cultural memory is so closely tied to individual and social identity that in order to be assimilated into another culture one must forget one’s original culture: “Assimilation, the transition of one group into another one, is usually accompanied by an imperative to forget the memories connected with the original identity” (p. 114)

This brief sketch does not adequately capture the richness of the narrative theory but can be amplified with reference to studies that characterize the schematic frameworks of particular cultures. The classic work is Campbell’s (1968) groundbreaking account of the monomyth of the hero with a thousand faces. Rich in detail and complexity, this monomyth in its simplest form is the story of the hero who is widely represented across temporal and cultural differences: “*A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man*” (p. 30). This traditional hero persists in the form of the action hero still widely known in contemporary Western literature and film—the hero who against all odds can defeat every foe and resolve any problem. While Campbell (1968) portrays a monomyth, subsequent studies isolate the schematic frameworks specific to particular cultures. Lévi-Strauss (1955) establishes the fundamental premise that the structural analysis of myth must seek not the earliest or the truest version of any story but the underlying



structural elements common to every version, whether the ancient Greek or the Freudian version of the Oedipal myth, for example, or the innumerable variations on the story of the North American trickster (pp. 432-443). Propp (1968) offers a similar analysis, more narrowly focused, however, on the Russian folktale, with its more than two dozen basic structural patterns (pp. 25-65). The ancient Chinese fables have analogical patterns, always with a didactic purpose (*Indiana Companion*, 1986, pp. 79, 127, 946). Aesopian fables from the Neo-classical period in England have patterns of conflict between positive, implied, neutral, or negative actors but like the ancient Chinese fables always have a didactic purpose, with a moral the essential and indispensable element (Jędrzejko, 1996, pp. 172, 174-176).

This approach to narrative via schematic templates or frameworks is subject to the critique that it focuses on the underlying patterns at the expense of the broader context of culture as a whole (Dundes, 1968, pp. xii-xiii). Wertsch (2002), however, shows how narrative templates relate to the broader culture in an analysis of the narrative templates of Soviet and post-Soviet Russian accounts of their Civil War and their participation in World War II (pp. 90-112). By this analysis, the narrative template in these accounts is a triumph-over-alien-forces template, with variations in the details of plot and character in official textbook accounts from the Soviet and post-Soviet periods (pp. 93-112). Many of the ancient Chinese fables are similarly embedded within the cultural context of the *Han Feizi*, with its vision of an absolutist state guided by a strict system of rewards and punishments, a vision quite at odds with the more benevolent vision of Confucius (Denecke, 2010, pp. 99-103, 284-287, 309-312).

## An Illustration: The Dramatization of Chinese Fables

We implemented a story-based approach to beginning Mandarin Chinese in the second of two eight-week courses at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Spring, 2012. The course was funded on a small grant from Rensselaer's Office of the Vice President for Research and had only seven students plus a graduate student serving as an assistant instructor and a half-dozen Chinese students who generously volunteered as mentors (an unusual luxury, we suspect, for any beginning language course). Our implementation of a story-based approach via dramatizations of the Chinese fables was guided by our projected learning outcomes and our planning of a sequence of activities from the selection of stories to the identification of appropriate target and pedagogic tasks and then to the incorporation of these tasks into the stories, following and elaborating on Long's (2000) sequence of target and pedagogic task-based activities (pp. 186-188) and addressing, insofar as possible, Lai and Li's (2011) challenge to incorporate collaborative and technology-based activities to support the learning (pp. 498-499, 509-512).

Our projected learning outcomes sought to ensure that students achieved mastery of at least a limited basic vocabulary in spoken and written Chinese; developed an operational proficiency in the performance of a few simple tasks, mostly notably an interview; developed a functional capability in the use of some basic communication technologies, especially Twitter; and experienced Chinese culture directly and in their own terms, including not only its customs and conventions but also and especially its ancient history and its classic literature and the beliefs and values embedded therein. Our story-based approach, from stories to tasks to stories, was guided by our prior experience with Agile software development theory and practice, which stresses

incremental and iterative development, a willingness to adjust to changing circumstances, and sensitivity to feedback from co-designers and prospective clients or customers (Cohen, 2010, pp. 7-20; Shirky, 2010, pp. 192-207). In addition, our approach was also guided by the Agile methodology of separating a target product into smaller, more manageable tasks and fitting these smaller tasks into measurable time schedules. For our implementation of this approach, we selected three Chinese fables because they are relatively short and readily accessible, even to beginning students, and because they are staples of the culture, widely known to Chinese people even at early school age. In addition, we introduced a variety of collaborative activities, including interactions with the instructors, other students, and student mentors—all of them native speakers of Mandarin—plus a range of technology resources, including pre-recorded video conversations, audio CDs, Twitter messages, and some Web-based resources, such as YouTube video clips.

Chinese classic literature offers vast array of fables and a wide range of selections (see, for example, *Chinese Ancient Fables*, *Selected Fables from Old Cathay*). Our choice of fables was guided by their degree of familiarity within the culture and their suitability to our combined task-based/story-based approach. We chose “Master Dong Guo and the Wolf,” “Buying the Case and Returning the Pearl,” and “The Spear and Shield.” Each of these fables has a moral or lesson well known as part of the Chinese cultural heritage. The first fable, “Master Dong Guo and the Wolf,” tells the story of a naive and bookish scholar who trusts his enemy, a wolf, rescues the wolf from some hunters by hiding it in his bag, and moments later is betrayed by the wolf, which threatens to eat him. The simple lesson is: Do not trust your enemy. The more subtle lesson is: Do not rely overly much on bookish knowledge, a lesson that we emphasized

in our reenactment of the fable. The second fable, “Buying the Case and Returning the Pearl,” tells the story of a man who looks to buy a pearl for his wife and decides to buy the box containing the pearl instead. A common understanding of the lesson is: Do not place too much trust in appearances. The third fable, “The Spear and Shield,” tells the story of a seller of a spear that can pierce anything and a shield that cannot be penetrated. The lesson is: One should not contradict oneself. Some of these lessons might have been advice to the ancient Chinese emperors, but the lessons have become widely known throughout the culture, so much so that when one of our students mentioned her role in the story of the spear and shield, one of her Chinese friends responded, “Of course, do not contradict yourself”—a small illustration but meaningful to our student as evidence of the wide currency of the fables among Chinese people. We have not attempted a thorough analysis of a large number of Chinese fables, but we note the basic narrative pattern or schematic framework in the fables we selected as a sequence from a problematic situation to a decision (usually a foolish decision) or from a question to a resolution and then a moral lesson, with the moral the essential element, as in the ancient Chinese and Aesopian fables generally (*Indiana Companion*, 1986, pp. 79, 946; Jędrzejko, 1996, p. 172).

Our selection of stories and the three fables in particular was guided by a few basic principles:

1. The need to match the complexity of the vocabulary and grammar in the stories to the level of the students’ abilities.
2. The need to select stories that would be well accepted by the students, that is, stories that the students would enjoy.

3. Our desire to expose the students to stories with a strong cultural and literary significance.

Our formulation of target and pedagogic tasks was guided by both Long's (2000) proposed planning sequence and examples from our textbook, *New Chinese Practical Reader 1* (2010), and by our addition of the stories—the fables—at the beginning and ending of the sequence of tasks. As a target task, we selected a combined introduction/interview as perhaps the most frequent and important challenge for college students, especially our Mandarin students, most of whom planned to travel to China, either for leisure or for work. For the students, the ostensible purpose of the target task was to demonstrate some knowledge of basic Mandarin as a requirement for employment. As pedagogic tasks, we devised the following, based in part on examples from the textbook (*New Practical Chinese Reader 1*, 2010):

1. Exchanging greetings and inquiring about the weather
2. Asking about one another's nationality
3. Asking whether one is busy or not
4. Introducing oneself and others
5. Asking the whereabouts or location of someone or something
6. Inviting others to share an activity or interest
7. Exchanging information about one another's college and major
8. Inquiring about each other's family
9. Making purchases in the market and using numbers
10. Sharing likes and dislikes

For these pedagogic tasks, following Ellis's (2003) concept of scaffolding via conversational dialogue (pp. 180-183, 191-195), we developed a sequence of in-class

student activities beginning with viewing video conversations; then observing instructor-assistant instructor reenactments of the conversations; then simply repeating the conversations, one student to another; and finally enhancing and then reenacting the conversations, usually as mini-performances in front of the class, as preparation for the dramatizations of the fables. For the implementation, we followed the sequence in the *New Chinese Practical Reader 1* (2010) through ten lessons, supplemented with extensive use of audio CDs for practice with both the vocabulary and the four Chinese tones. Given the difficulty—for English-speaking students—of mastering the tones, we utilized the assistant instructor and one of the mentors, one man and one woman, both Beijing natives with a standard Mandarin dialect, to practice with the students, and we engaged the other mentors to support additional practice for our students at home, between classes. The use of male and female voices helped to ensure that students would become accustomed to even slight vocal modulations that could affect their pronunciation of the tones.

For the target task, the combined introduction/interview, we set the time at the mid-point, four weeks into the term, and we resituated the class in Rensselaer's Center for Communication Practices and designated an extra out-of-class meeting as a Mandarin Corner, comparable to the English Corner common in many Chinese universities. We invited members of our Chinese Students and Scholars Association to attend the Mandarin Corner and entertained approximately twenty visitors, all of whom we invited to meet and greet our students, again for additional practice with native speakers of Mandarin. For the interview itself, we designated three of the mentors to ask some basic questions about family background, field of study, and friends and interests. The interview questions followed from the pedagogic tasks and helped to prepare for the

dramatizations, which we anticipated would provide a basic framework for greetings and information exchanges in a marketplace and other social settings. This sequencing of tasks is shown in Figure 1.

For the dramatizations of the fables, we provided a basic script as an outline, assigned students' roles based on their performance with the pedagogic and target tasks, held two practice sessions and one formal rehearsal, and invited students to improvise as they wished, using the conversations they had developed in the course of executing the tasks. We projected video backgrounds appropriate to each of the fables—wolves for “Master Dong Guo and the Wolf” and marketplace scenes for “Buying the Case and Returning the Pearl” and “The Spear and Shield.” We also borrowed Chinese costumes from a Rensselaer theater production of *Mulan* to add some more local color and verisimilitude. For each of the fables, the students added short exchanges of information about family background, school and local interests, and likes and dislikes. In their reenactment of the fable of “The Spear and Shield,” they improvised a little more creatively, as shown in Figure 2. In this instance, they exchanged bits of information about the weather, their college experience, their nationality, and the like, and they also, at our suggestion, added a Twitter message and introduced a well-known action hero as the recipient of the message—Jackie Chan.

In the context of the dramatization, the information exchanges take on an added significance and illustrate the potential of the dramatic setting to motivate students to engage in creative, collaborative dialogue. As pedagogic tasks, these exchanges were merely preparation for the target task and the dramatizations. As components of the target task, they were more or less random illustrations of knowledge of basic Mandarin. Within the context of the dramatization of “The Spear and Shield,” the information

exchanges have further implications derived in part from the context of the story and in part from the students' creative imaginations and their developing fluency with their new language, as they negotiated the transition from the classroom to the dramatic world of the fable. Within this context, for example, if the Seller of the spear and shield is an American student working to earn money to pay college tuition, he or she may be working illegally in the Beijing market. So the buyers in the crowd could be expected to ask what otherwise might seem to be casual or even irrelevant questions. The context of the story thus gives added meaning to the questions.

In this context, the Twitter message also becomes relevant as a potential resolution to the tension at the heart of the story. According to the standard version of the fable, when the Seller offers for sale a spear that can pierce anything and a shield that cannot be penetrated, one of the prospective buyers asks what would happen if a person were to attempt to pierce this kind of shield with this kind of spear. In our students' reenactment of the fable, in one of the information exchanges, the Seller identifies Jackie Chan as her master, with the expectation that she will be able to enlist his help in solving a problem. Thus when one of the buyers poses the question about the spear and the shield, she responds that she does not know what would happen but will Tweet her master to pose this question. By chance, however, she has already practiced sending this Tweet three times, so when she attempts to Tweet Jackie Chan, Twitter responds, "Whoops, you already tweeted that." As a consequence, the Seller has to improvise and quickly brings the story to an end, leaving the question of the spear and the shield unresolved, as indeed it is left unresolved in the original fable and must be left unresolved since the lesson or moral is not to determine what would happen but to avoid the problem in the first instance by not contradicting oneself.



The schematic narrative framework of the three fables—and story of the spear and the shield in particular—permits innumerable variations in the specific characters and events, such as exchanges of information about college background, areas of study, and the like, and the introduction of additional characters, such as Jackie Chan. Indeed the story could just as well have been adapted to a contemporary context, with incompatible electronic devices, for example, replacing the spear and shield—provided that the reenactment retained the underlying framework of the problem, the decision or question, the resolution (or irresolution), and the moral lesson. In this instance, we suggest, however, that the introduction of Jackie Chan as a character in the dialogue is not merely an additional detail but an attempt at an accommodation to a different cultural heritage, an invocation of the traditional monomyth of the hero with a thousand faces, here instantiated in the figure of a Westernized action hero. We can only speculate about what might have happened if our Seller had successfully Tweeted her master, Jackie Chan. Would she have introduced a fundamental tension between the wisdom of ancient China and the prowess of the modern action hero who can defeat any foe and resolve any problem, however intractable?

From the perspective of language and culture learning, the significant issue is not, however, to be able to answer questions of this kind but to observe the opportunity in the story-based experience for students to negotiate these complex meanings for themselves, in their own terms, to exercise their creativity and their imaginations, to experience another culture directly without, however, necessarily abandoning their own. Our dramatizations of the fables, however limited in scope, thus may provide a brief look at the process of cultural translation, which may not require forgetting one's own culture for the sake of entering into another (Assmann, 2010, pp. 112-114; Straub, 2010,

pp. 220-222, 226-227). Rather, such a process may be a complex negotiation and interaction—a conversational dialogue—between one culture and another, potentially enriching both.

#### Assessment of the Story-Task-Story-Based Experience

We cannot offer any definitive assessment of the efficacy of our implementation of a story-task-story based approach through dramatization of the Chinese fables based on the experience of only seven students over the course of one eight-week course. We can report, however, that, based on self-reports, students perceived noticeable improvement in their spoken and written Mandarin and responded positively to their experience with the dramatizations as an engaging approach to learning a new language. Students’ perceptions of progress in spoken and written Mandarin, on a 1 (low) to 10 (high) Likert-type scale, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Students’ Self-Reports of Progress in Spoken/Written Mandarin

Pre-Course Questionnaire	Post-Course Questionnaire
Spoken Mandarin Average: 2.2857	Spoken Mandarin Average: 4.00
Written Mandarin (Pinyin) Average: 6.00	Written (Pinyin) Average: 7.5714
Written Mandarin (Characters) Average: 3.7143	Written (Characters) Average: 5.4286

Beyond these overall perceptions of progress, students’ perceptions of their experience with other aspects of the course reveal some of the strengths and limitations of our approach. Not surprisingly, students found their interactions with other students and with native speakers to be the most useful aspects of the course. All of their responses were positive, and one student noted that these interactions “made me more active and willing to use the language for the immediate feedback available.” Other

students described the interactions as “more personal,” “most helpful,” “very helpful,” “super useful,” “immersive,” and “invaluable.” Most of the students enjoyed the dramatizations and explained that they “made me work without reference material,” “made me think about how to improvise and use what was learned during the class,” and “made me learn phrases and how they are actually used in conversation.” One student described the dramatizations as “very fun,” with “room for improvisation,” and another acknowledged that “the pressure made me work harder.” But one student said simply “No” to the dramatizations and explained that “I like to learn with structure.”

Despite these generally positive responses, we need to acknowledge that we had the benefit of a very small class—only seven students—and the additional benefit of a generous group of native Mandarin-speaking Chinese students, who served as mentors and conversation partners between classes and at the Mandarin Corner, a benefit likely not available to every language teacher. Nonetheless, we believe that our experience with the dramatizations is replicable since it requires only a single dedicated teacher, supported by readily available textbooks and technologies and willing to draw on the rich cultural heritage that every language tradition has to offer, not least, in our case, the rich historical and literary culture of ancient China and the wisdom embedded in the ancient fables.

Figure 1. Illustrations of Task Sequencing (in Chinese, with English Translation)

Illustration 1: Exchanging Information or Opinions.

Pedagogic Task (Exchange requests for information or opinions.)

你觉的今天天气好吗? How do you like the weather?

我喜欢这个天气。你呢? I think it is very good, and how do you like it?

你喜欢这本书吗? Do you like this book?

这是一本好书。我喜欢, 你呢? I believe this is a good book. What do you think?

Target Task (Respond to questions during the Mandarin Corner interview.)

Interviewer: 请问你叫什么名字? May I know your name?

Student: 我叫JANE。你呢? My name is Jane, and my family name is Jones, and yours?

Interviewer: 我叫HUA。My name is Hua, and my family name is Chen.

Dramatization, from “The Spear and Shield” (Improvise while on the road to the market.)

On the way to the market (not part of the script):

Buyer 1: 你好吗? How are you?

Buyer 2: 我很好, 你呢? I am fine, and you?

Buyer 1: 我也很好。I am fine too.

Illustration 2. Asking for Opinions on Whether Something Is Interesting.

Pedagogic Task (Ask and answer questions.)

昨天的京剧怎么样? Is yesterday’s Beijing Opera interesting?

很有意思。Very interesting.

Target Task (Respond to questions during the Mandarin Corner Interview.)

Interviewer: 你的专业是生物工程吗? Your major is bioengineering?

Student: 生物化学。Biochemistry.

Interviewer: 你喜欢你的专业吗? Do you like your major?

Student: 我喜欢我的专业。I like my major.

Interviewer: 你觉的你的专业有意思吗? Do you feel biochemistry is interesting?

Student: 很有意思。Interesting.

Dramatization, “Buying the Case and Returning the Pearl” (Incorporate questions into the dramatic action.)

Merchant: 看一看，瞧一瞧了，大大的宝珠，很有意思。Take a look at this pearl and its big size, very interesting. This pearl has a good and big size, very interesting.

Onlooker: 宝珠没意思。The pearl may not be that interesting.

Figure 2. The Dramatization of the Spear and Shield Fable (in English Translation)

On the road to the market:

Buyer 1: How are you?

Buyer 2: I am fine, and you?

Buyer 1: I am fine too.

Buyer 2: How's today's weather?

Buyer 1: Today's weather is fine.

At the market [referring to video]:

Buyer 3: That's interesting.

Buyer 4: That's very interesting.

Seller: Take a look. I'm selling good old stuff. This spear is very nice. This is a very good spear. Do you like this spear?

Buyer 1: Yes, it's very good. I like it very much. Let me take a look.

Seller: This spear is very good.

Buyer 1: [Jabs with spear.]

Seller: This spear is very good. It can pierce through anything.

Buyer 2: Do you often come here?

Seller: Yes, I often come here.

Buyer 3: May I ask, do you have a master?

Seller: Yes, I have a master.

Buyer 3: Who is your master?

Seller: My master is Jackie Chan.

Buyer 3: Jackie Chan is a good, respectable master.

Buyer 4: I want to buy a book. Do you sell books?

Seller: I'm sorry. I do not sell books.

Seller: I am selling this shield also. This shield is also very good.

Buyer 1: Let me take a look.

Seller: This shield is also very good. Nothing can pierce through it.

Buyer 2: Are you a college student?

Seller: Yes, I am a college student.

Buyer 2: What do you study?

Seller: I study biology.

Buyer 3: Where is your college located?

Seller: My college is in Troy, New York.

Buyer 3: How is Troy, New York?

Seller: Troy, New York is a very interesting place.

Buyer 1: What country are you from?

Seller: I am American.

Buyer 1: I am also American.

Seller: Very good.

Buyer 3: Do you often come to sell the spear and the shield?

Seller: I do not often come here [to sell the spear and the shield].

Buyer 1: What is going to happen when you try to penetrate the shield with the spear?

Buyer 4: Yes, what is going to happen?

Seller: What is going to happen if I try to penetrate the shield with the spear? This is a very good question. I am going to text message to my master, and then I will be able to give you an answer.

Seller [Text Message]: I am Mary, there is a problem . . .

Twitter: Whoops, you already tweeted that.

Seller: Very sorry. Very sorry. I must go now. I'm very glad to meet you.

Buyer 4: We're glad to meet you too.

Seller: Bye.

All: Bye.



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