

# Benefits of using an “immediate Chinese” approach

Shu-Ju Chen  
Kanazawa Institute of  
Technology

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This paper proposes an approach called “immediate Chinese” aimed at making learners of Chinese and other foreign languages feel comfortable and able to use some target language to introduce themselves in early lessons. Using such an approach not only provides learners with a fresh view of language learning, but also helps to ease their anxiety in the classroom. Also, it gradually helps to develop their general confidence in studying a foreign language.

この論文は、学習者が新しい外国語を学習し初めたステージからすぐその言葉で自己紹介ができることを目的とした“immediate Chinese”と言う方法を提案する。この方法を使えば、学習者は新しい視線で外国語の学習方法を再認識することが出来るだけでなく、教室内で勉強する時の緊張感も感じず、さらに彼らに外国語を学習する自信を身に付けることもできる。

## Reasons for using the “immediate Chinese” approach

Let us begin with a question. As a language learner, when you start learning a new language, what do you learn first? In other words, what are you first able to do with the language? Yes, you have to think back to the days when you began learning a new language and think of how and what you were taught in the early lessons. There probably will not be many different answers; just like when I myself flash back to my long ago memories learning both English and German and my most recent learning experiences with Japanese – I was always taught to memorize alphabets/symbols and then match them with their sound.

Due to my aversion to this teaching approach, today, being a language teacher myself, I feel like I have to do something different in order to give my students a fresh start and help maintain their interest in learning the new language and eventually to help build their confidence in learning it. Borrowing Langer’s (1997) words as support, “Virtually any task can be made pleasurable if we approach it with a different attitude” (p. 61). I feel that if we language teachers employ a different teaching approach when starting a new course, we will help students to form a better attitude toward the new language.

In addition to fostering learner motivation to study a target language, making learners take more responsibility for their own study is the other key factor in the “immediate Chinese”



approach. According to Kenji's example mentioned in Brown (1994), due to cultural influences, Japanese students usually are heavily dependent on their teachers for learning. In other words, Japanese students inside a classroom usually play a passive role, not an active one. Passive students can be found in every class, of course, including language classes, but language learning normally requires students to take an active role and produce original and spontaneous language.

In order to return the studying responsibility back to the learners, it is perhaps better for teachers to say as little as possible and make learners do most of the talking during class time whenever possible. In short, students are the ones who are and should do the studying, not teachers. Thus, placing studying responsibility back on the students' shoulders is one of the ways to make them aware of and conscious about learning. Just as Davis, Garside, and Rinvolucri (1998) say, "We believe that awareness that suddenly burst into a person's consciousness lead directly to attitudinal and behavioural changes" (p. 3). By speaking the target language themselves in early lessons, learners are more likely to find out what is easy for them to produce and what is not. In consequence, they will tend to find ways to work out what they find difficult to produce in the target language. The more responsible learners/students are, the more efficient learning outcomes will be reached.

Omaggio (1986) suggests that if the first day of class for true beginners offers opportunities to learn and drill simple phrases, like greetings and introductions, and use these phrases, they often show more interest towards the new language. The term immediate Chinese that I use in this paper is similar to what Omaggio calls "the direct method": Both tend to avoid the use of translation and try not to teach grammar rules explicitly. In addition, in using such an approach, pictures are often used for better comprehension of the target language.

## Participants

42 third year university students chose the Chinese I course at the Science and Technology college where the author teaches. They had all finished their required English courses prior to their enrollment in this Chinese course. Chinese is usually the second foreign language for almost all of them. Most of them are shy, quiet, not willing to speak in front of their peers, but hardworking and studious.

## Method

The term "the immediate approach" Mauvais (2001) uses for his oral class is somewhat different from what I call the immediate Chinese approach in this paper. The major difference between the two is that Mauvais' immediate approach is designed for long-term study, while my "immediate" approach is designed for and focuses heavily on language use at the beginning of the class. In addition to this major difference, Mauvais' immediate approach involves a lot of pair work, while mine focuses firstly on guided practice and secondly on pair work.

The class met only once a week; on Wednesday afternoon, 90 minutes per session. When the lesson was conducted with this immediate Chinese approach in the second session, the only material distributed to students was a handout with drawings (see Appendix 1; note that the example shown in the appendix is only one half of the material). The drawing was given to students as reference and as a piece of material on which they could make notes during class, enabling them to review and practice what they learned in class on their own at home.

Before the lesson, not a single student was able to produce a sentence in Chinese, with the exception of "hello," "thank you," or "I love you." Based on student responses to a questionnaire, which was conducted at the first session, 36 students were hoping that they would be able to speak either a lot or some

Chinese or, at least, be able to comprehend a little bit of Chinese after they learned it. In short, most students were determined to take away some Chinese language with them at the end of the semester. Therefore, enabling students to converse or understand a bit in Chinese was the most crucial teaching issue for the course.

Almost all students had studied English for at least eight years previously but were barely capable of conversing in English. According to Graham-Marr (2009), this sort of learning-acquisition dilemma happens with most second/foreign language learners everywhere. To reduce the possibility of a reoccurrence of this learning dilemma, I decided that enabling students to say some complete sentences in the target language at an early stage of their learning would help build confidence, encouraging them to continue on their language-learning journey.

Also, as the students were in a monolingual environment, they were told it was OK to use their mother tongue, Japanese, for help where it was necessary, but they were not encouraged to do so all the time. The rationale is that to allow students to use a small amount of their mother tongue during the class, according to Davis et al. (1998), makes them feel more comfortable about using the target language.

### **Description of the approach**

The following is the flow of how the immediate approach was carried out in my Chinese I class.

In our second meeting, when students still did not know each other very well, I found myself walking into a classroom where all students sat quietly at their desks and looked, or perhaps stared, at me while I entered the classroom. I interpreted that look as a message that they were eager to learn Chinese. Therefore, I went to the teacher's desk and said "hello" in Chinese. Luckily, a few of them responded with the same greeting, while

the rest of them smiled shyly and quietly at me. That was a good start, I thought, and at the same time I also felt that this was going to be a good class. I smiled back at them then distributed the drawing handout (Appendix 1) and asked them to go over the drawing in Japanese. Then I asked them what message they could get from the drawing. Students seriously but excitedly looked at the drawings and eventually flipped the handout over and over, and many of them even started consulting with their neighbors and tried hard to guess what they were going to do with it before I gave them instructions. I guessed it was because using a drawing at the beginning of a language class was a new experience for them. In my opinion, providing students with something new will not only foster their interest in learning but also create a learning-friendly environment inside the classroom. As Ayers (2001) asserts, "I believe that teachers must create opportunities for learners to become more skilled, more able, more powerful... Teachers must issue a compelling invitation to learn, and then become guides and mentors to learners in that immense journey" (p. 61).

After asking what message or impression they got from the drawing, some brave students answered "self-introduction." So from there we went straight to work on introducing oneself in Chinese. On computer projector I showed the first segment of the drawing – a woman raising both her hands and happily saying hello to everybody. After asking students who the woman is, some pointed at me and replied "teacher" loudly. "Very good." I said in Chinese and told them that it was me in the drawing, that I was going to introduce myself to all of them in Chinese, and that I wanted them to introduce themselves to everybody using Chinese. They said "Eei..." but with an excited expression on their faces.

I said "hello" in Chinese while waving one hand to them and they immediately mimicked what I had said. Meanwhile, I saw lots of them making notes on their handouts, presumably, *ka-*

*takana* symbols for their own study. I personally do not like the idea of using *katakana* to act as a pronunciation aid. However, I ignored it at this stage since one of the objectives was to draw their attention to unfamiliar sounds on their own and to hope that they would be more responsible for their own learning. The above step is crucial because once the class atmosphere is formed, it is hard to change again. Therefore, as a teacher, one should be sure to help students with the target language without too much explanation in their mother tongue. Furthermore, it is important to act appropriately in front of students, which means that the teacher should not be too shy. It is important for the teacher to pretend that he or she is really introducing himself or herself to someone, but at a slower speed than usual. Dubin and Olshtain (1986) mention that the role of a teacher is to stage, create an atmosphere, and move learners into that atmosphere and make them feel that they are in a real situation. Thus, as language teachers, we should do our best to virtually immerse learners in their target language.

In the next step, I asked the students to turn to their neighbor and say "hello" to each other, and they soon turned to their neighbor and greeted each other in an exciting and pleasant way. Some who had eye contact with me after they greeted their neighbor also said "hello" to me spontaneously. That was nice because I sensed that the whole class was immersed in a mood to absorb and try whatever new target language they were taught. Then I showed the next slide –another portrait of the teacher, and this time I pointed at myself and said "I" in Chinese. Students themselves repeated right after me without need for instructions. Followed by an "equal" mark, then I said "am" in Chinese, and again the students mimicked. Finally the English word "name" appeared on the slide, so I said my name in Chinese. At this moment I could see students were asking themselves the question of how to say one's name in Chinese, so I told them that it is OK to say their name in Japanese since pronunciation of Chinese had not yet been introduced. Thus,

students went on to say "I", "am" in Chinese, and their "name" in Japanese.

The next step involved having students repeat everything they had just been taught. In doing so, learners benefit and recently introduced structures were reinforced. As for the rest of the pictures, they were all conducted in the same way: I demonstrated a new phrase, followed by student practice then students reviewed from the beginning after they had learned a new sentence. Being able to use a little target language immediately after introducing it often helps build confidence in studying a foreign language. Once learners' confidence is high, they tend to be better language learners. To reach this goal, teachers should provide learners with sufficient input and output (Sato, 2009).

This immediate approach can be used for very early lessons of a long-term language course to enable learners to use a little of the target language to build confidence and to heighten their interest in learning. With this in mind, teachers should design their drawings carefully. That is to say, basic and easy-to-produce structures are ideal for this approach. In my opinion use a majority of affirmative structures is recommended, as affirmative structures seem to be acquired more easily than negative ones. The other advantage of using affirmative sentences earlier is that once learners are familiar with affirmative structures, the effort they will have to make for learning related negative structures will be relatively easier. Hint words to help students understand the drawings better are also recommended.

### **Student responses to the approach**

At the end of the semester, students were given a questionnaire as a way of reflecting on their studying of Chinese. There were three questions regarding the immediate Chinese approach (see Appendix 2). The table below is a general summary of student responses to the questions.

Table 1. The immediate approach questions and student responses

Questions	Responses(N=42)
<p>1. Is it a good idea to be able to use a little Chinese to introduce yourself prior to the studying of its phonetic system? Why or Why not?</p>	<p>Yes: 41 No: 1</p> <p>Reasons for "yes": (sample answers)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I now have a sense of rhythm of how Chinese is spoken.</li> <li>• I know what Chinese sounds are difficult for me to pronounce through practice.</li> <li>• It is the most fundamental social thing to introduce oneself.</li> <li>• It is fun to be able to speak a language through memorization of its sounds.</li> <li>• This exercise is a good medium to introduce the Chinese language.</li> <li>• I am satisfied that I can speak a little Chinese now.</li> </ul> <p>Reasons for "no":</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I want to study the Chinese phonetic system first.</li> </ul>
<p>2. Did you gain some confidence in learning Chinese by doing the "self-introduction" activity? Why or why not?</p>	<p>Yes: 40 No: 2</p> <p>Reasons for "yes": (sample answers)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am able to introduce myself to native speakers of Chinese now.</li> <li>• If the lesson begins with studying phonetic symbols, that is not only boring but also wouldn't enable me to speak some Chinese like I can now.</li> <li>• I have a feeling that my Chinese proficiency is going to be higher than my English.</li> <li>• I am able to recall the Chinese structures and/or words that I learned.</li> <li>• I am able to speak some Chinese though this is my first time to study the language.</li> </ul> <p>Reasons for "no":</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being able to introduce myself doesn't guarantee I will be able to read articles written in Chinese.</li> </ul> <p>No special reasons.</p>

Questions	Responses(N=42)
3. Do you want next year's students to do the same practice? Why or why not?	<p>Yes: 42 No: 0</p> <p>Reasons for "yes": (example answers)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I now have confidence in speaking Chinese so I think it will have the same effect on my junior schoolmates.</li> <li>• It is fun and easy to speak Chinese in this way.</li> <li>• It is amazing that I can not only introduce myself in a new language but I can also understand my partner's introduction after just a short time studying the language.</li> <li>• I feel that I benefit a lot from being able to use a new language.</li> <li>• It is basic and polite to be able to introduce myself to others.</li> </ul>

These results show almost all students liked the approach. According to the questionnaire results as summarized above, it is fair to say that as they were able to produce some sentences in the target language in the beginning stage, they tended to enjoy learning more and they tended to have faith in their studying of the target language. Thus it is fair to suggest that the immediate approach is a workable method to trigger student motivation and maintain it after the start of their learning journey.

Although this "immediate" approach lesson is designed to be conducted at the early stage of a sequential language course to raise student confidence in learning a foreign language, the use of it does not have to be limited to only the early lessons. Teachers can add new drawings to the old ones as new structures are introduced throughout the semester. In doing so, students not only get to know new structures but have chances to review and reinforce what they have learned in the past. Furthermore, they also tend to be more used to and fluent in the target language.

### Some advantages of adopting the "immediate" approach in the early lessons

There are five major benefits of using the immediate approach:

1. Students gain confidence through practicing with the approach. In other words, if learners feel less anxious about the target language, they will be more comfortable using it.
2. Students are more aware of their own learning. For example, they will pay more attention to unfamiliar sounds and find their own way by familiarizing themselves with those sounds. In short, students will have to take more responsibility for their learning.
3. Students learn to look at language in a fresh way as they can come to understand language learning does not have to follow the same patterns they have become accustomed to. Consequently, they might also help themselves to find a learning method that suits them.
4. The use of this approach will familiarize students with structures of the new language naturally but not explicitly.

If students repeatedly practice structures, they are likely to remain accessible to them for some time.

- Students learn to collaborate with one another and learn from each other through pair and group work. Since the approach is not a traditional teacher-centered lesson, once students encounter problems, such as with pronunciation, they have to find a way to solve them, and very often, their peers are the best ones to ask for help. Basturkmen (2006) points out that the use of the scaffolding process, for example as when a less skillful or knowledgeable learner gets help or support from a more skillful/knowledgeable peer through collaboration work, will benefit all learners. In addition, Kirchoff (2006) says, "Learning to speak a foreign language is a cognitive and a social challenge; it requires risk-taking and relationships. The students' relationships can cause any well-planned lesson to succeed or fail" (p. 615). I do agree with what the previous two authors suggest because, in my class, I also find that once the class has a supportive atmosphere, students seem to perform better than when working alone.

## Conclusion

Trying to speak a foreign language does not have to be as difficult as most students think. The issue is how we prepare learners to start their learning journey. If teachers can make students speak comfortably in front of their peers at the beginning of study, then it should be no major problem for them to speak the target languages later on.

The immediate Chinese approach is just one of many approaches that we can adopt in our class to enable learners to use the target language comfortably. This paper is written to share with fellow language teachers an approach that works for my classes, and I believe it may work for others, too. Of course, some modification is expected to meet the demands of different class contexts. This paper does not intend to prove that the

immediate Chinese approach is the best way to start a language course. However, using such an approach can help reduce student speaking anxiety and help them to better enjoy their classroom language learning experience.

## Informed consent

The author hereby declares that the research subjects (students) mentioned herein gave their informed consent.

**Shu-Ju Chen** is a Lecturer at Kanazawa Institute of Technology in Ishikawa, Japan. Her research interests include second/foreign language acquisition, multilingual and multicultural society, and Asian culture.

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## Appendix 1

### Part of "self-introduction" drawing used in class.



## Appendix 2

### Questions related to the "immediate" approach in the end-of-semester questionnaire.

2回目の授業:「自己紹介」に関する質問

1. 二回目の授業で、発音系統を習う前に簡単な中国語で「自己紹介」をしたのは良かったと思いますか。、その理由も教えてください。
2. 短時間で簡単な中国語で「自己紹介」をしたのは、中国語の学習に少しは自信がついたと思いますか。、その理由も教えてください。
3. この「自己紹介」の授業は、将来後輩たちが受ける中国語Iの授業で続けたほうがいいのか、やめたほうがいいのか。、その理由も教えてください。