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## **The Challenges of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language in India**

### **About the Author**

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**Ms. Lin** has been teaching Mandarin Chinese and Chinese literature for over 5 years. In May 2016, she moved to Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand, to teach Mandarin Chinese at schools. The village she stayed in was close to the Thailand-Myanmar border; therefore, students were composed of Chinese immigrants, Burmese refugees, and members of other minority groups. Learning how to conduct multi-level as well as multi-ethnic classes was a challenge initially. In May 2017, she was nominated by the Taiwan Ministry of Education to teach Mandarin at the Taiwan Education Center (TEC), O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU) in India. She has been teaching at TEC-JGU since then, and was promoted to Director of the Center in July 2018. She served in this position till April 2019. Apart from teaching, she is also working on helping Indians to better understand Taiwan and its unique role in the world. Her areas of expertise include Chinese Literature, Classical Chinese Literature, and Chinese Language Training.

## Abstract

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This paper presents an overview of the current status of existing Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) programmes in India. It discusses the current international context surrounding growing interest in Chinese language instruction in India by both the Chinese and Indian governments. It presents several common errors Indian students of Chinese language make, particularly with regards to pronunciation and character recognition, and proposes some possible classroom techniques to mitigate them. Lastly, the paper discusses the risk foreign professors run of violating intercultural taboos while teaching Chinese in India, particularly in relation to religious norms.

## Introduction

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Education of Chinese language as a foreign language in India first began to develop systematically when the Cheena Bhavana of Visva-Bharati University was founded by the poet and educator Rabindranath Tagore in 1937. However, the outbreak of the Sino-Indian War in 1962, led to long stagnation phase in Chinese language teaching and learning in India. Only in recent years have the educational leaders in both India and People's Republic of China begun to resume sustained pedagogical interactions. Despite, periodic tense bilateral relations between India and China the Chinese government has begun to expand its support for Chinese language instruction in India under the aegis of its Confucius Institutes program. For its part, Taiwan (formally known as the Republic of China) has been actively supporting Chinese language instruction in India, having sent Chinese language teachers to India since 2011.

Currently, there are eight Taiwan Education Centers in India, two Confucius Institutes and two Confucius Classrooms, eight homegrown Chinese departments in Indian universities (offering over 20 courses), and a small number of private teaching centers that offer Chinese. In 2019, it was estimated by Chinese Embassy that the total number of Chinese language learners in India has reached over 20,000. However, the pedagogy of Chinese language instruction in India remains understudied. In particular, there have been few studies of how the main Indian language in northern India—Hindi—differs from Chinese, and how this offers both opportunities and potential pitfalls for Chinese language instructors based in India. In the rest of this briefing note, I will showcase current research on Chinese language instruction in India and supplement it with my own personal experiences over the past several years. In particular, I will focus on the external environment problems, internal acquisition errors and intercultural issues.

## Teaching in the Midst of a Complicated International Situation

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Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) has been employed as a soft power tool by both the Taiwanese and Chinese governments for years.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, its development in target countries is highly relevant to both the educational and foreign policies of both Taiwan and China. With the rise of China's economy and military strength, TCFL is also gaining greater acceptance and popularity in many countries. India, however, is an exception. Because of the ongoing territory disputes between the two great powers (which came perilously close to an armed confrontation during the Doklam standoff in 2017), the scale of TCFL as an industry in India has not expanded as quickly as it has in North America or Europe. Still, both the Taiwanese and Chinese governments have increased their attention to Chinese language instruction in India in recent years.

In 2013, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan launched the 8-year Exporting Mandarin Chinese Overseas Project, aimed at expanding the Chinese learning market, increasing the number of Chinese learners, and improving the brand of Taiwan in TCFL activities. According to the New Southbound Policy, announced by President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016, TCFL is also viewed as a connection to the higher education or academic institutions in the target countries.<sup>2</sup>

TCFL is also seen as a national priority because of its soft power implications by the Chinese government. Therefore, the Confucius Institutes, providing Chinese language and cultural courses abroad, have been widely established and funded by the Chinese government since 2004. Changchun Li, a former member of the Politburo Standing Committee, explained in a 2011 speech that, "The Confucius Institute is an appealing brand for expanding our culture abroad. It has made an important contribution toward improving our soft power. The 'Confucius' brand has a natural attractiveness. Using the excuse of teaching Chinese language, everything looks reasonable and logical." Previously, Changchun Li had commented in 2009, "that Confucius Institutes are an important part of China's overseas propaganda set-up." So far, there are approximately 525 Confucius Institutes worldwide, across almost all continents—118 in Asia, 54 in Africa, 161 in the Americas, 173 in Europe, and 19 in Oceania.<sup>3</sup> However, there are only two Confucius institutes in India, which is home to 1.3 billion people, and most private Chinese language learning institutes and universities with departments of Chinese language studying are taught by non-native speakers.<sup>4</sup>

There are several factors that explain the relative paucity of TCFL in India. Teaching Chinese as a foreign language in a modern context was established by University of Calcutta in 1918, but not until Rabindranath Tagore founded Cheena Bhavana of Visva-Bharati in 1937 did the related research, such as ancient Chinese philosophy and the comparison of Indian and Chinese religions, start to flourish. However, the outbreak of the Sino-Indian War in 1962 stopped the development. Indian public opinion turned hostile toward Cheena Bhavana of Visva-Bharati; many courses were canceled, and the number of scholars on staff decreased. This directly affected the importation of teaching materials and the quality of research. The Chinese schools in Kolkata were also shut down due to a drop in student enrollment. As the relationship between China and India gradually eased, and the Chinese economy grew significantly, the Chinese learning population in India started to expand in the late 1980s.<sup>5</sup> But even the increase of the number of students did not have the Indian government open the market for the Mandarin Chinese native speakers from China due to the subtle relationship between two countries.

At the present, India has two Confucius Institutes: one located at Mumbai University and the other at VIT University in Vellore (Tamil Nadu). While Beijing has repeatedly expressed a desire to open more Confucius Institutes in India, the Indian government has been reluctant to authorize them thus far.<sup>6</sup> India is also home to two Chinese Language Studying and Training Centers that are directly supported by the Chinese government— one was opened at Lovely Professional University in Phagwara (Punjab) in December 2018, and the other is due to begin operating soon at O.P Jindal Global University in Sonapat (Haryana). It is unclear why the Chinese government has created this new category of "Chinese Language Studying and Training Centers," but some scholars, noting that the new centers seem to be opening only in politically sensitive target countries, suggest it may be a way of avoiding the notoriety the "Confucius Institute" brand has attracted in some parts of the globe.<sup>7</sup>

To meet the enormous demand for Chinese language teachers without opening the door to the Chinese state, the Indian government has instead turned to Taiwan for assistance. In 2011, Kapil Sibal, India's Minister of Human Resources, requested Taiwan's Education Minister Wu Ching-ji to send 10,000 Chinese language teachers to India.<sup>8</sup> However, this scale has thus far not proved achievable due to a lack of funding on both sides. Up until now, National Tsing Hua University has only established 8 Taiwan Education Centers in India, with the backing of the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Taiwan.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the governmental organizations, there are 20 Chinese language courses and 8 Chinese language-related departments in Indian universities. According to a statistic provided by the Chinese Embassy in 2018, there are around 20,000 Chinese language learners overall in India.<sup>10</sup> But most courses are not taught by native speakers--92% of the Indian college students receive instruction from non-native speakers (Sharma, 2013). This is not because of the preference of Indian learners, but rather a reflection of the lack of foreign Chinese language instructors in India. On top of Indians who seek to study Chinese in India, it is worth recalling that recent data shows that there are over 20,000 Indian students studying in China and Taiwan; while most are pursuing degrees in technical fields such as pharmacy, the number of Indians learning Chinese abroad is increasing.<sup>11</sup>

Even if India and China improve their bilateral relations, TCFL as an industry in India will still be limited by the political factors. How to learn from one other's advantages and retain each state's individuality without harming the relationship between the two countries will be an inevitable issue for the Indian government whenever interacting with China. In addition to absorbing the relevant knowledge of language and language teaching, language instructors should also be sensitive to the realities of current international politics. This will not only enable instructors to know how to interact with the government of the country they reside in, but also contribute to the development of their careers.

## **Common Challenges in the Classroom: Students' Acquisition Errors**

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In addition to a tricky international context, Chinese language teachers in India also face challenges in their classrooms. One recurring issues has to do with students' learning difficulties.

### **1. Common Acquisition Errors by Students**

Hindi, the language spoken by over 70% of Indians, is the dominant language in north India. It is a standardized and Sanskritised register of the Hindustani language. Chinese Mandarin is a Sino-Tibetan language, based on Beijing dialect. Its syllables are generally composed of initials, finals and tones. Through the comparative study of Hindi and Chinese Mandarin, we can figure out the source of many common errors Indian learners of Chinese exhibit.

#### **I) Common Pronunciation Errors of Native Hindi Speakers**

There are 13 vowels and 40 consonants in Hindi, without stress or tone.<sup>12</sup> Among the Hindi consonants, voiced and voiceless stop consonants, voiced and voiceless affricate consonants as well as tap all have corresponding aspirations, which directly differentiate the meanings. In contrast, there are 22 initials in Mandarin, including 21 consonants and zero vowels. There are 39 vowels in Chinese Mandarin, 10 vowels, 13 vowels and 16 vowels. Tone is attached to every syllables, and it also differentiates the meaning.

For Indian students, the easiest sounds to learn in Mandarin are the ones which also exist in Hindi, and the hardest ones to learn are those which do not. When students are unable to pronounce a sound which does not exist in Hindi, they tend to replace it with similar sounds from Hindi or even English. The following charts show the most consonants and vowels pronunciation errors made by the Hindi speaking students (Chart 1 and 2).

Chart 1

Consonant	Average Error Ratio	Errors & Error Ratio
q[te']	68%	[te]7% [tɕ]28% [tʃ]33%
zh[tʂ]	63%	[ts]10% [tʃ]12% [te]13 [tʃ']28%
x[ɕ]	57%	[ʃ]32% [s]15% [tʃ']10%
p[p']	55%	[b']5% [b]10% [p]40%
c[ts']	52.5%	[ʂ]10% [tʂ']15% [s]17.5%
ch[tʂ']	52%	[tʃ']15% [ts]17% [tʃ]20%
sh[ʂ ]	50%	[s]17% [ʃ]33%
j[te]	47%	[dʒ]5% [ts]7% [tʃ]35%
r[z]	40%	[r]8% [ɹ]32%
z[ts]	32%	[tʃ]8% [te]12% [tʂ]12%
t[t']	31%	[t']1% [t]30%
k[k']	23%	[x]3% [c']3% [k]17%
f[f]	22%	[ɸ]6% [v]6% [p']10%
s[s]	20%	[ʃ]3% [ʂ]17%
b[p]	9%	[b]3% [t]6%
d[t]	7.5%	[t']7.5%
h[x]	7%	[k]7%

The common consonant errors made by students are apical-dental affricates (z[ts]/ c[ts']), retroflex (zh[tʂ]/ ch[tʂ']/ sh[ʂ ]/ r[z]) and alveolo-palatal (j[te]/ q[te']/ x[ɕ]), because these pronunciations do not exist in Hindi. In addition, there is no voiced consonants in Mandarin, hence students often mistaken the voiceless bilabial stops (p[p']) with the voiced ones.

Chart 2

Vowel	Average Error Ratio	Errors & Error Ratio
si[y]	92%	[u]75% [Y]17%
o[uo]	82%	[o]82%
a[A]	63%	[a]63%
[ɿ] & [ʅ]	56%	[i]56%
iong[yŋ]	42%	[uŋ]42%
üe[yɛ]	39%	[uɛ] 39%
e[x]	34%	[e]34%
ui[uei]	30%	[u] + [ei]30%
an[an]	23%	[aŋ]23%
ing[iŋ]	21%	in[in]21%
ao[au]	12%	[ɔ]12%
h[x]	7%	[k]7%

In terms of vowels, what bothers students the most is [y], [ɿ] and [ɨ], since they do not appear in Hindi. The other errors are usually related to a misreading of the transcription.

Moreover, the tone system, which is completely strange for Hindi speakers, is also difficult for Indian students to master. The instructors have to keep these common errors in mind, correcting students at the right moment, especially during the initial stages of learning. The frustration of being unable to communicate in an actual context can sometimes reduce students' willingness to learn afterwards. For adults, who are likely to be very much in the grip of their native language, the instructors should show the place and manners of articulation via multiple media, along with the practice of flow of speech and listening. I have tried to enhance my color of lipstick in the primary class, and exaggerated facial features, making it easier for students to observe the way I pronounced and then imitate.

## II) Difficulties with Character Recognition

Hindi, written in the Devanagari script, is an alphabetic writing, hence the character is inseparable from the sound, which forms the meaning. Yet Chinese characters, which are composed of stroke-formed radicals, display the sound and meaning simultaneously. Therefore, the reader has to be equipped with a knowledge of vocabulary, the sounds of the radicals, as well as the process of radical composition to process the script.<sup>13</sup> For many Hindi-speaking learners who are already used to being able to process a script aurally, reading with Chinese characters can be a very painful task which may even shatter their confidence during the early stages of learning. In the initial stage of Chinese character teaching, I added the pronunciation and meaning teaching of the radicals. Therefore, after accumulating a certain degree of Chinese character knowledge, students can guess the pronunciation or meaning of a character.

### Difficulties with Teaching Across Cultures – The Example of Religious Taboos

In addition to the difficulties associated with teaching the purely linguistic aspects of a language, native Chinese language instructors in India also face difficulties with intercultural interactions. These may initially seem like a challenge, but ultimately can serve as a good lesson for the teacher and the taught.

I had such an experience during my first semester teaching at O.P. Jindal Global University. I showed my students a picture of raw meat to teach a character “肉”, which means flesh or meat in Mandarin (see Picture 1). Instead of repeating the character after me, a student instead covered up her eyes with both hands, expressing her strong discomfort at seeing the picture. I had used the picture as a part of my teaching materials at least twice in Taiwan and Thailand, and had never received any complaints until attempting to use it in an Indian classroom. Other Chinese language instructors in India have since reported similar cases to me. To avoid potentially offending the dietary taboos present in parts of India, some instructors use cartoons or icons instead of pictures of real food to indicate animal protein (Picture 2).





It is better to err on the side of caution when dealing with potential intercultural taboos. Last January, I wrote an email to a colleague teaching Chinese at Jamia Millia Islamia University (JMI), a predominantly Muslim institution, warning her to be careful about advertising Chinese New Year celebrations based on the Year of the Pig. The pig, the last animal on the Chinese zodiac calendar, is viewed as unclean and unfit to consume by many practicing Muslims. Earlier this year, the BBC reported several stories on how Chinese living in Muslim-majority societies attempt to celebrate the Year of Pig without provoking a backlash.<sup>14</sup> However, my colleague subsequently reported that there had been no major issues regarding the Year of the Pig on her campus and her students had been fine with depictions of the pig being.

Although controversy was avoided in that particular instance, Chinese language instructors in India should still be aware of the importance of doing advance research into their students' cultural background. It is one of the most important ways to avoid the potential conflicts with the students.

## Summary

In an ever-changing international society, the role of a foreign language instructor is no longer limited to simply teaching a given language, but now also includes serving as a bridge between countries. In addition to constantly enriching the knowledge related to linguistics and education, an instructor must also understand and respect the culture of the place of residence and keep abreast of changes in international relations in order to resolve the cultural conflict that may occur, or even directly avoid its occurrence.

## End Notes

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1. To clarify, “Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language” is a frequently-employed term that highlights the unique issues that foreign learners of Chinese languages face compared with native speakers. The term encompasses the teaching of all Sinitic languages, including Mandarin, Cantonese, and many others. However, at present, to the best of my knowledge, only Mandarin is formally taught in India. This includes the language instruction of the Taiwan Education Centers, which teach Mandarin (as opposed to Taiwanese).
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7. Interview with an Indian academic who requested anonymity, Delhi, February 7, 2019.
8. Taiwan Today. 2011. “Taiwan pledges 10,000 Mandarin teachers for India.” November 24. <https://bit.ly/2GiMZhk>
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10. Xinhuanet. 2018. “汉语热”在印度持续升温 约有20所大学开设中文课 [“The Trend of Learning Chinese is Becoming More Popular in India: Approximately 20 Universities Have Chinese Language Courses.”]. April 26. <https://bit.ly/2IdTTXv>
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12. The material in the next two paragraphs draws heavily from: Lu Wang. 2014. *An Analysis and Teaching Strategies of Chinese Pronunciation Errors Made by International Students Whose Mother Tongue is Indian*. Master's Thesis, Hebei Normal University, China.
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