

ELEMENTARY CHINESE LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: EVIDENCE FROM HUANGHAI UNIVERSITY*

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Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of elementary Chinese language instruction for international students at Qingdao Huanghai University. Specifically, it had three aims: 1) to assess the current state of elementary Chinese language teaching for international students at the university; 2) to identify key pedagogical problems in existing practices; and 3) to propose targeted recommendations for instructional improvement. A mixed-methods design was adopted to achieve these objectives, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data were obtained from a corpus analysis of students' in-class exercises and homework and were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Observation data were analyzed thematically, while interview data were subjected to content analysis.

The findings corresponded directly to the research objectives. First, current instruction was characterized by highly standardized and inflexible

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practices, limited responsiveness to learner differences, inadequate academic support, and monotonous homework and assessment routines. Second, several pedagogical problems were identified, including rigid instructional procedures that prioritized linguistic forms over communicative competence, insufficient learning guidance associated with low student engagement, and repetitive assignments coupled with a single-mode evaluation system. Third, based on these findings, the study proposed a series of improvement strategies, including the adoption of student-centered differentiated instruction, task-based curriculum redesign focused on authentic communication, structured support mechanisms to enhance participation, and diversified assessment practices supported by timely formative feedback. Together, these findings offer practical insights for strengthening elementary Chinese language education for international students in higher education settings.

Keywords: Elementary Chinese Language Instruction, International Students, Mixed-Methods Research, Teaching Deficiencies, Corresponding Suggestions

Introduction

In the context of deepening globalization and the ongoing Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese language, as both a carrier of culture and a key medium of international communication, has experienced a growing global surge in demand.

Elementary Chinese instruction occupies a foundational position within the system of international Chinese language education and represents a critical stage in the language learning process. It not only lays the linguistic groundwork for learners but also shapes their subsequent motivation and capacity for further development. As such, the quality of instruction at this stage plays a decisive role in determining whether students can successfully progress to higher levels of proficiency (Xia, 2014).

As an institution actively engaged in international Chinese language education, Qingdao Huanghai University has experienced a steady increase in international student enrollment in recent years, placing greater demands on the quality and effectiveness of its Chinese language teaching. Against this backdrop, this study takes Huanghai University as its research site to examine the current state of elementary Chinese instruction. Through a systematic analysis of the current teaching situation, this study seeks to offer practical implications for enhancing teaching effectiveness, thereby contributing to the development of international Chinese language education.

Objectives

1. To analyze the current state of elementary Chinese language teaching for international students at Qingdao Huanghai University
2. To identify the pedagogical problems in the current teaching practices
3. To propose evidence-based recommendations to enhance teaching effectiveness in elementary Chinese language education

Literature Review

As the demographic backgrounds of international students become increasingly diverse and their learning needs more individualized, traditional teaching models have struggled to meet evolving instructional demands, and their limitations have become increasingly evident. At the elementary level of Chinese language learning, international students often lack sufficient exposure to an authentic target-language environment, encounter cultural differences, and display heterogeneous learning habits. These factors collectively place greater demands on instruction and present new pedagogical challenges. Against this backdrop, the present study systematically reviews and analyzes relevant academic literature from the past decade, identifying and synthesizing key issues

in current elementary Chinese teaching, and thereby establishing a theoretical foundation for subsequent research.

Liu (2018) and Zhao (2019) argue that elementary Chinese instruction tends to overlook individual differences among international students, particularly with regard to language proficiency, cognitive styles, and cultural backgrounds. Constrained by large class sizes and a uniform instructional pace, the prevailing “one-size-fits-all” approach fails to accommodate diverse learning needs and limits the implementation of differentiated instruction. As a result, it falls short of addressing students’ individualized learning needs and runs counter to learner-centered pedagogical principles.

Fan (2015), Yang (2018), and Wang (2021) note that teaching methods in elementary Chinese classrooms remain relatively monotonous. Instruction continues to rely heavily on teacher-centered knowledge transmission and repetitive drills, resulting in a classroom environment that is often uninspiring and not conducive to the development of communicative competence.

Jiang (2018) and Li (2020) observe that the content of elementary Chinese instruction has not kept pace with contemporary needs. Textbook topics are frequently outdated and insufficiently aligned with students’ real-life communicative contexts. In addition, the limited variety of instructional resources constrains the provision of practical and immersive learning experiences expected by today’s international students.

Lu (2016) and Mei (2022) highlight persistent challenges related to teaching personnel. There remains a notable shortage of qualified Chinese language instructors, and the professional competencies of existing teachers vary considerably. These issues directly affect instructional quality and hinder the sustainable development of the field.

Chen (2022) and Miao (2022) point out that cultural differences are insufficiently addressed in elementary Chinese instruction. Current teaching

practices often fail to account for the cognitive characteristics of learners from both Chinese-character and non-Chinese-character cultural backgrounds, and lack targeted instructional design. Consequently, learners' practical difficulties in acquiring Chinese are not effectively resolved.

Hao (2019) and Tong et al. (2019) further argue that interaction in elementary Chinese class is limited. Both teacher–student and peer interaction remain insufficient, restricting opportunities for meaningful language practice. This, in turn, impedes the transformation of linguistic knowledge into communicative competence.

Methodology

This study explores the Elementary Chinese Comprehensive Course at Qingdao Huanghai University and identifies core issues in beginner Chinese instruction. Adopting a mixed research method, it combines quantitative and qualitative data to holistically evaluate learning outcomes and teaching practice. This blended approach enhances the validity of the research results and provides empirical guidance for course optimization and teaching improvement.

1. Research Design

As illustrated in the figure 1, this research adopts a mixed-methods design that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches.

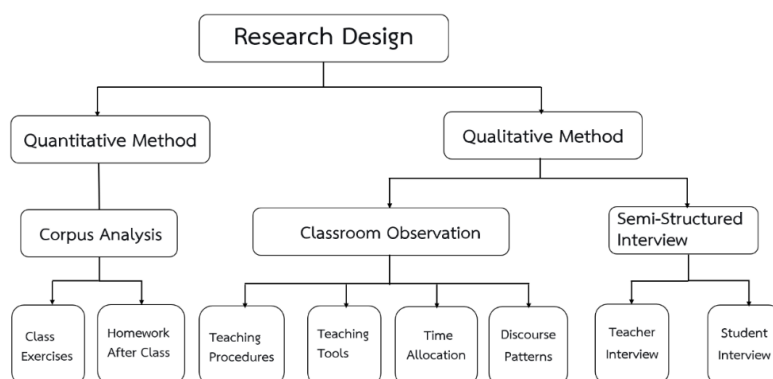


Figure 1 Framework of Research Design (Source: Constructed by the researchers)

The quantitative strand uses corpus analysis of in-class exercises and homework to trace learning processes and assess actual learning outcomes. The qualitative strand draws on classroom observations of authentic teaching practices, as well as semi-structured interviews with teachers and students to capture firsthand feedback on the teaching and learning experience. Taken together, these methods provide an empirical foundation for subsequent analysis and interpretation.

2. Population and Sample

2.1 Target Population

The target population comprised international students enrolled in the Elementary Chinese Comprehensive Course at Huanghai University during the 2025–2026 academic year, as well as Chinese language instructors responsible for teaching the course.

2.2 Sample Selection

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had direct and first-hand experience relevant to the study's aims. The corpus comprised 42 valid samples of in-class exercises and homework submitted by international students during the first semester of the 2025–2026 academic year. Classroom observations were carried out over a six-week, covering the full instructional sequence of the Elementary Chinese Comprehensive Course offered that semester. The interview sample consisted of two experienced Chinese language instructors and five international students who had completed all course modules and formal assessments.

3. Research Instruments

Three research instruments were used to ensure data validity and reliability. A corpus collection form was developed to systematically code and analyze students' written exercises and homework, allowing for consistent tracking of task types, frequency, and patterns in learner output. A classroom

observation sheet was designed to capture key instructional dimensions, including instructional procedures, teaching tools, time allocation, and discourse patterns. In addition, tailored semi-structured interview guides were prepared separately for teachers and students to elicit their perspectives on course materials, teaching design, learning support, assessment practices, and other relevant themes.

4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from student exercises and homework were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages, to map the distribution of task types. Qualitative data from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews were subjected to complementary analytical procedures. Observation data were analyzed thematically to identify salient issues across four core dimensions: instructional procedures, teaching tools, time allocation, and discourse patterns. Interview transcripts were analyzed through content analysis, coding and categorizing participants' responses to capture teachers' and students' authentic perspectives on their teaching and learning experiences.

Results

1. Research Findings from Corpus Analysis

From the table 1, an analysis of the 42 collected student exercise and assignment samples identifies three task categories: transcription-based, production-based, and practice-based. Transcription-based tasks constitute the majority (25 cases, 59.5%) and primarily involve copying Pinyin, Chinese characters, new vocabulary, sentences, and short texts. These tasks are intended to familiarize students with linguistic forms through repeated writing and to reinforce memorization. Production-based tasks account for 11 cases (26.2%), including sentence construction, sentence transformation, and dialogue

composition based on model texts, with the aim of developing learners' ability to apply vocabulary and grammatical structures. Practice-based tasks represent the smallest proportion (6 cases, 14.3%) and consist mainly of textbook exercises and HSK-style practice tests, designed to improve test-taking skills and overall language proficiency.

Table 1 Students' Exercise and Assignment Texts

Type	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Transcription-based	Transcribing Pinyin and Chinese characters	4	9.5%
	Transcribing new vocabulary	7	16.7%
	Transcribing new vocabulary and sentences	8	19.0%
	Transcribing text passages	6	14.3%
	Subtotal	25	59.5%
Production-based	Sentence making using new vocabulary and grammar	4	9.5%
	Sentence rewriting	3	7.1%
	Dialogue composition modeled on text passages	2	4.8%
	Text rewriting	2	4.8%
	Subtotal	11	26.2%
Practice-based	Textbook exercises	5	11.9%
	HSK practice tests	1	2.4%
	Subtotal	6	14.3%

Overall, the assignment design is characterized by a clear imbalance, with a heavy reliance on transcription-based tasks and comparatively limited opportunities for productive language use. The tasks are largely uniform in format and depend predominantly on mechanical, pen-and-paper activities. Moreover, their content shows limited connection to real-life communicative contexts, which constrains their potential to stimulate learner engagement or support the development of autonomous learning. These findings point to a broader instructional issue: an overemphasis on mechanical practice at the expense of cultivating communicative competence in the Chinese language.

2. Research Findings from Classroom Observations

2.1 Instructional Procedures

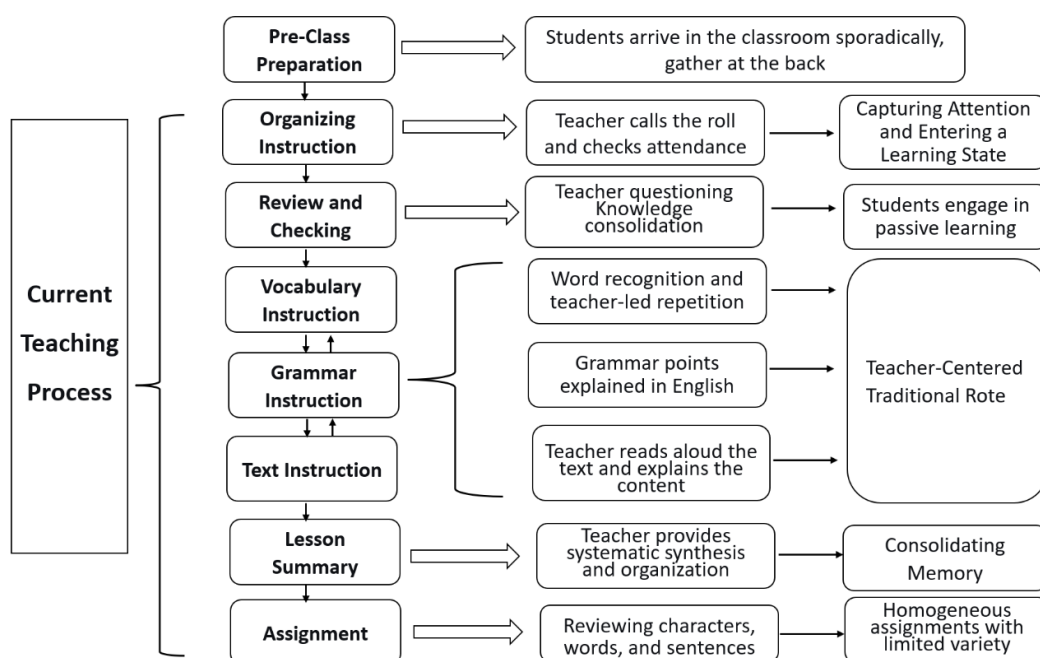


Figure 2 Instructional Process (Source: Constructed by the researchers)

As shown in the figure 2, the Elementary Chinese Comprehensive Course follows a conventional teacher-centered instructional model. Pre-class preparation is loosely organized, with students arriving sporadically and a noisy classroom atmosphere. Once the lesson begins, the teacher usually starts by taking attendance in order to focus students' attention and help them transition into a learning mode. A question-based review session then follows to reinforce content from the previous lesson, although students generally respond in a passive manner. New content is delivered through vocabulary repetition, grammar explanation in English, and teacher-led reading and interpretation of texts. In this one-way knowledge transmission, students remain largely passive recipients, resulting in a monotonous and unengaging learning experience.

Lessons conclude with teacher summaries, while homework focuses mainly on repetitive review tasks with limited variety. Overall, this approach is not conducive to the development of learner autonomy.

2.2 Teaching Tools

In the Elementary Chinese Comprehensive Course, instructional resources remain limited, particularly in terms of digital materials. Teachers rely mainly on blackboard writing and printed images, while multimedia use is largely confined to basic audio recordings for text reading and vocabulary pronunciation. As a result, the pedagogical potential of digital resources remains underutilized, with limited support for diversified instruction or improved teaching effectiveness.

2.3 Time Allocation

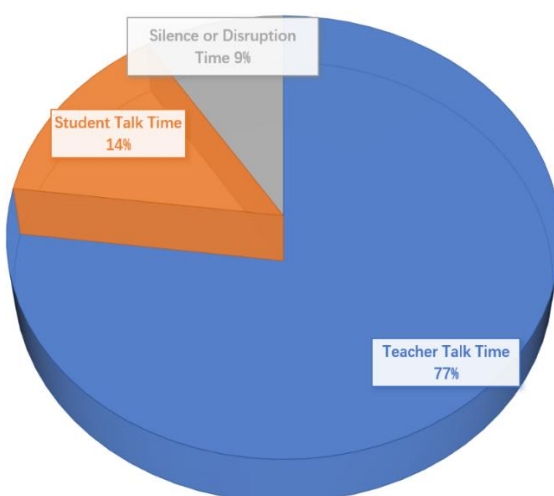


Figure 3 Instructional Time Allocation (Source: Constructed by the researchers)

Figure 3 presents the time allocation of the Elementary Chinese Comprehensive Course. In a 50-minute lesson, teacher talk accounts for 77% of total class time, while student talk represents only 14%, indicating limited opportunities for participation. The remaining 9% is occupied by non-instructional

activities, such as silence and disruptions. These findings reveal a clear imbalance in classroom discourse, with teacher-led instruction dominating the lesson.

2.4 Discourse Patterns.

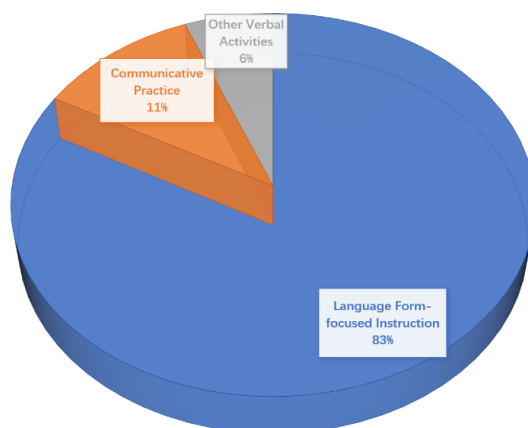


Figure 4 Structure of Discourse Patterns

(Source: Constructed by the researchers)

Figure 4 describes the time-based distribution of classroom verbal activities. A quantitative analysis of a 50-minute lesson shows that language form-focused instruction, including vocabulary, grammar, pattern drills, and text explanation, accounted for 83% of total class time, making it the dominant discourse pattern. In contrast, communicative practice, which emphasizes practical language use, accounted for only 11%. Other verbal activities, such as classroom management and disciplinary reminders, comprised the remaining 6%.

These findings reveal that the current class is largely characterized by a knowledge-oriented teaching model, with strong emphasis on linguistic knowledge and limited attention to the development of communicative competence in authentic contexts. This suggests an insufficient connection between knowledge acquisition and practical language use.

3. Research Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews

Drawing on instructor feedback and student experiences, this study identifies several problems in the elementary comprehensive Chinese course.

Teaching materials: Although the textbook “*Road to Success: Elementary* (2008 edition)” is well structured, its content has become increasingly outdated and less relevant to contemporary learners. The exercises are repetitive and provide limited opportunities to develop communicative competence. In addition, the textbook pays insufficient attention to everyday contexts such as food delivery, courier services, and mobile payments, while offering little content related to vocational needs.

Class instruction: Some senior instructors demonstrate limited proficiency in the use of digital and multimedia tools and continue to rely primarily on lecture-based methods. Time constraints and examination pressures further emphasize knowledge transmission over skill development and communicative practice, thereby widening the gap between classroom learning and real-world language use. Students also report fatigue resulting from slow pacing or overly dense instructional content.

Learning support: Pre-class preparation, in-class participation, and post-class review are inadequately scaffolded. Students receive limited guidance on effective preview strategies, classroom interaction often remains superficial, and homework assignments lack systematic reinforcement. As a result, students make relatively slow academic progress.

Classroom management: Maintaining a balance between active participation and orderly classroom management remains challenging. Excessive interaction may disrupt the flow of instruction, whereas overly rigid discipline can diminish student engagement.

Learner diversity: Differences in nationality, prior knowledge, aptitude and age create substantial proficiency gaps that are difficult to accommodate through

uniform pacing. Moreover, the curriculum is not sufficiently differentiated to address different learning goals, such as examination preparation, everyday communication, or professional use.

Learning evaluation: Assessment relies heavily on instructor grading, with limited use of self-evaluation or peer evaluation. Its score-centered design has low credibility among students and fails to adequately capture learning progress or practical language proficiency. In addition, feedback is delayed, with results typically released one week after the examination.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of the above multi-source data, the major problems in elementary Chinese language teaching are divided into four categories, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Summary of Pedagogical Problems in Elementary Chinese Instruction

Problem Category	Specific Problem Explanations	Source Basis
Teaching Orientation and Methods	Neglect of individual differences among international students	Classroom observation Semi-structured interviews
	Overreliance on a single instructional method and teacher-centered lectures	
	Outdated instructional content and textbooks	
	Insufficient integration of multimedia and instructional resources	
Instructional Design and Implementation	Rigid and conventional instructional procedures	Classroom observation Semi-structured interviews
	Excessive dependence on blackboard writing and physical images	
	Imbalanced teacher-student discourse time	
	Linguistic structure prioritizes linguistic forms over communicative functions	
Learning Support Student Engagement	Insufficient academic guidance	Classroom observation Semi-structured interviews
	Passive learning attitude	
	Low levels of class participation	
Exercises & Homework Evaluation Methods	Monotonous exercises and homework, dominated by mechanical copying tasks	Homework analysis Semi-structured interviews
	Simplistic assessment mechanisms with delayed feedback and insufficient motivational incentives	

First, teaching orientation and methods often overlook individual learner differences, favoring a one-size-fits-all approach. Second, instructional design and implementation are constrained by rigid procedures, outdated tools, and an excessive emphasis on linguistic form at the expense of communicative competence. Third, learning support and student engagement remain insufficient, as reflected in limited instructional guidance and low levels of participation and motivation. Fourth, homework and assessment practices are undermined by repetitive assignment designs and a narrow evaluation system dependent on a single mode of assessment.

Recommendation

To address the pedagogical deficiencies identified above, four targeted recommendations are proposed. First, teachers should adopt differentiated instruction that accommodates diverse student profiles, replacing one-size-fits-all approaches with adaptive strategies responsive to individual needs. This entails student-centered pedagogies featuring tiered tasks and personalized guidance, calibrated to students' cognitive pace, learning preferences, and prior language proficiency.

Second, instructional design should be restructured through the integration of task-based activities, updated digital resources, and a more balanced emphasis on linguistic accuracy and communicative competence. Specifically, teaching procedures should incorporate interactive multimedia tools and authentic communicative contexts, thereby bridging explicit grammar instruction with meaningful language use.

Third, learning support systems should be strengthened through structured academic guidance and participatory mechanisms that sustain motivation and counter declining engagement. Practical measures include expanding after-class tutoring and online Q&A channels, alongside collaborative

activities such as group discussions and role-plays to promote active participation.

Fourth, homework and assessment practices should be diversified to prioritize higher-order cognitive engagement over mechanical repetition, with timely formative feedback ensured through multiple evaluation methods. Key innovations comprise authentic assignments, such as practical writing tasks and project-based learning, together with a comprehensive assessment framework integrating formative indicators (e.g., class participation, homework completion) with summative measures (e.g., final examinations).

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