

## BOOK REVIEWS

Cynthia Y. Ning & John S. Montanaro. (2012) *Encounters: Chinese Language and Culture Level 1, Annotated Instructor's Edition* [汉语和中华文化]. New Haven: Yale University Press. ISBN 9780300161663, 278 pp. (paper; also available as ebook)

Cynthia Y. Ning & John S. Montanaro. (2012) *Encounters: Chinese Language and Culture Level 1, Annotated Instructor's Edition*, Vol. 2 [汉语和中华文化]. New Haven: Yale University Press. ISBN 9780300161670, 317 pp. (paper; also available as ebook)

Cynthia Y. Ning, Stephen L. Tschudi & John S. Montanaro. (2016) *Encounters: Chinese Language and Culture Level 2, Annotated Instructor's Edition*, Vol. 3 [汉语和中华文化]. New Haven: Yale University Press. ISBN 9780300161687, 216 pp. (paper; also available as ebook)

Cynthia Y. Ning, Stephen L. Tschudi & John S. Montanaro. (2016) *Encounters: Chinese Language and Culture Level 2, Annotated Instructor's Edition*, Vol. 4 [汉语和中华文化]. New Haven: Yale University Press. ISBN 9780300161694, 257 pp. (paper; also available as ebook)

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One of the latest innovations in Chinese instruction is the *Encounters* program. It incorporates research findings on language learning and teaching and integrates language with culture instruction in a sophisticated manner. Unusually, Chinese learning in this program proceeds with the unfolding of an engaging dramatic storyline. This program promotes a mastery of progressively complex real-world tasks, with ample audio files, videos, and other media that provide enriched and stimulating input.

### 1. Descriptive summary

According to the authors, the *Encounters* program follows the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* ([www.actfl.org](http://www.actfl.org)) to help students develop their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. This program is composed of four textbooks and their accompanying multimedia resources that help English-speaking students develop

their Chinese from beginner (that is, novice) to intermediate-low proficiency ('Level 1', *Books 1 & 2*), and from intermediate-low to intermediate-high proficiency ('Level 2', *Books 3 & 4*) (see [encounterschinese.com](http://encounterschinese.com)). Each level has a relatively independent storyline depicting characters from diverse backgrounds and their life adventures in modern China. Throughout the series, the authors present students with new vocabulary, cultural information, and grammar that are then required to be used in different tasks. These tasks are centered on or related to the episodes in the dramatic story that students learn about.

Incorporating various resources, the *Encounters* program offers support for both students and teachers to promote Chinese learning and teaching. Each textbook consists of ten units, with the exception of *Book 1*, which begins with an "Introductory Unit" on the Chinese sound and script systems. Each unit comprises three to seven "Encounters" that focus on specific tasks and language skills, and ends with a "Recap" section that reviews the grammar, vocabulary, and skills taught in the unit. For every unit, the textbook is supplemented by materials on its companion website: videos and transcripts of the dramatic episodes, videos of mini-documentaries, audio files, online workbooks, and the "Trainer App" for character-writing instruction. Furthermore, teachers can find practical and detailed suggestions on carrying out textbook activities, and extra support for teachers is offered online with unit-by-unit lesson-planning guides, teaching seminars and tutorials, and teaching discussion forums.

## 2. Evaluative summary

The motto for the textbook series as presented on the website is "Live the Language!" (see [encounterschinese.com](http://encounterschinese.com)), which reflects the weaving together of language and culture in the *Encounters* program. This program emphasizes spoken communication in daily life and develops language proficiency with authentic materials and real-world tasks. Also, this program sequences language learning to continuously meet communicative needs as students progress.

### (1) Practicality

The authors of the *Encounters* program strive for practicality by utilizing authentic materials from daily life in contemporary China. The dramatic episodes are filmed in six different places in China, covering daily-life scenarios in both rural and metropolitan areas. Mini-documentaries are also provided to explore current cultural issues in China and to present local residents' perspectives and insights into those issues. As Long (2015) points out, authentic texts with elaboration constitute

quality language teaching materials, as they cater to learners' communicative needs and stimulate learner interest and motivation. The use of authentic and elaborated materials in the *Encounters* program is carefully planned. Throughout the four textbooks, students are constantly reminded that it is acceptable to understand only the main ideas at the beginning, and that as their proficiency grows, they will be able to garner more details from the materials. The textbooks provide students with meaningful input that will help spur their imagination and sustain their motivation for learning.

In addition, the *Encounters* program simulates real-world situations and makes use of authentic tasks to enable students to communicate effectively in real-life contexts. As the motto "Live the Language!" suggests, students are expected to *learn through doing* (Nunan, 2014). That is, they develop their Chinese proficiency by using the language in the scrupulously-structured situations that approximate those in the real world. To achieve the ultimate goal of successful communication in Chinese, the *Encounters* program employs various types of tasks, including *focused* tasks (Ellis, 2003), *pedagogic* tasks, and *real-world* tasks (Long, 2015). One example of a focused task comes from *Book 1* (p. 21, 1.10), where students are to name four famous people using the linguistic structure *Tā jiào* ('His/Her name is'). Pedagogic tasks can also be found, as in *Book 1* (p. 202, 8.38), where students are to interview their classmates and learn facts about their daily routines. As for real-world tasks, one example appears in *Book 2* (p. 114, 14.19): students are to go to a Chinese restaurant and record their Chinese-only interactions with the staff. In every unit, a complex real-life task is first broken down into several manageable focused and pedagogic tasks, and these simpler tasks allow students sufficient opportunities to build up the essential language skills gradually. It is expected that after mastering the simpler focused and pedagogic tasks, students will incorporate all learned skills to complete the complex real-life task at the end of the unit.

## (2) Progressiveness

Another feature of the *Encounters* program is the careful sequencing of learning materials to respond to students' changing needs for communication as their Chinese proficiency develops. According to Graves (2014), materials sequencing is one important step in planning efficient teaching. Long (2015) also suggests that learners should start with simple tasks and gradually take on more complex tasks: doing so leads to the ultimate goal of performing real-world tasks with full complexity. In the *Encounters* program, progressive learning is evident not only within every unit, but also throughout the four textbooks; it is evident in the organization of topics and themes, the treatment of grammar, vocabulary, and culture, and the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

This series uses a hybrid task-based language teaching approach: the unit organization has a pre-task, task, and post-task design, with a strong approach to grammar teaching. Every unit (except the “Introductory Unit”) begins with activities that promote listening and speaking skills, and then proceeds to reading and writing activities. Such sequencing echoes Byrnes’s (2009) idea of the oral-written continuum for staging language development. That is, students progress from the less-advanced stage of oral conversation to the more advanced stage of written communication. Moving from oral ability to written ability is especially important for learning Chinese, because the lack of direct correspondence between sound and script makes learning the written characters a daunting task (Wang & Yang, 2008). Starting with oral skills can give students more confidence and motivation to continue learning.

Throughout the four textbooks, the treatment of topics progresses from general to more specific. For example, the topics of self-introduction and personal information are visited several times. In “Unit 1” and “Unit 2,” *Book 1*, students learn basic conversation skills such as how to discuss names and ages. Then in “Unit 11,” *Book 2*, students learn to discuss more details about themselves, such as their family and hobbies. Building on these, in “Unit 21,” *Book 3*, students discuss personal histories and past experiences, and provide relevant comments from their own perspectives. Such gradual, repeated exploration of the topics corresponds to students’ Chinese development at different stages.

The teaching of grammar, vocabulary, and culture is also designed to meet students’ communicative needs at different proficiency levels. At “Level 1,” grammar is taught in the “Grammar Bits” and “Recap” sections (*Book 1 & 2*), while at “Level 2” (*Book 3 & 4*), grammar is taught only in the ‘Recap’. This reflects second language acquisition researchers’ call for a reduced emphasis on explicit grammar instruction (see, for example, Ellis, 2003) and thus allows for more study of other aspects of the language as proficiency develops. For vocabulary learning at “Level 1,” character-writing skill is highlighted in the “Learning to Write Characters” section and strengthened with the *Workbook* and the “Trainer App,” with the vocabulary reviewed in the “Recap” as well. Additionally, a “Unit Rap” facilitates character and word memorization in a humorous and musical way. At “Level 2,” however, only the “Recap” and the “Trainer App” are maintained to provide specific instruction on vocabulary. Such a change puts less emphasis on character writing, which may reflect the more modern needs in writing Chinese: at the advanced level, students will often type papers and other assignments on a computer rather than write them by hand. In addition, the authors appear to focus more on cultural knowledge at “Level 2,” as the relatively short video interviews and introductions in the “Cultural Bits” component at “Level 1” are further expanded into a full “Cultural Mini-Documentaries” section. This change echoes the *ACTFL*

*Performance Descriptors* (2012), which states that as proficiency develops, students need more cultural knowledge to better understand the language.

Progressive learning is also evident in the materials design for teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. At “Level 1,” the major focus of listening and speaking is on using simple language to ask and answer questions and to negotiate and describe. At “Level 2,” students are expected to become more specific in their asking and answering of questions and to provide more details in their negotiations and descriptions. For reading comprehension at “Level 1,” dialogues and short passages prepare students for intensive reading. At “Level 2,” students start reading short stories illustrated with line-drawn pictures, and then proceed to longer stories for extensive character recognition. Similarly, writing skills are developed gradually. At “Level 1,” students start writing short notes using characters, whereas at “Level 2,” they begin writing short stories and are encouraged to share their stories on the *Encounters* website. Aside from stories and narratives, students also practice writing expository and argumentative essays. These changes in materials design reflect ACTFL’s developmental view on students’ expanding communicative needs as their proficiency increases.

### 3. Significance and suggestions

The *Encounters* program is an exemplar for a new generation of Chinese teaching materials. It draws on the latest research findings on language learning and teaching, and takes full advantage of digital technology and multimedia to enrich students’ learning experiences. Support from the online community on the *Encounters* website also enables students and teachers to explore more efficient learning and teaching methods.

For teachers to best utilize the *Encounters* program, a few issues deserve further consideration. Although the program in most cases provides both simplified and traditional Chinese characters in the textbooks so as to reach a larger audience and offer the freedom of individualized learning, several texts written in traditional Chinese do not have corresponding simplified versions, including some stories in *Book 3* (e.g., p. 21, 21.12). This might simply be an oversight, but as mentioned previously, learning characters can be a daunting task. Simplified Chinese text may be more cost-effective to learn, as it can reduce students’ workload and is official and pervasive in mainland China. However, students should also be encouraged to recognize traditional characters, as they are still in widespread use across the world, especially in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. This textbook series tries to address the question of which system to teach by offering both. But teachers will have to choose between the two systems, ultimately, and

they may have to convert some texts from one character system to the other when using this textbook series.

Another issue is related to the textbooks' content and their intended users. Although the authors of the *Encounters* program do not specify the targeted age range of students, the textbook content, including the dramatic stories, topics, and tasks, indicates that the program would likely be better received by adult students than younger learners. Nonetheless, teachers can make adaptations for younger learners, high-school students in particular. For instance, when teaching "Unit 19: Planning Outings" (*Book 2*, pp. 245–82), teachers can help younger students conceptualize this lesson as holiday planning with their parents, friends, or siblings, instead of following the original design of adults planning their own travels. The major topics are suitable for students at both college and high-school levels, but for younger students, teachers would need to make adaptations to better cater to their developmental levels and communicative needs.

Thirdly and finally, while the "Cultural Mini-Documentaries" and the "Reading Real-life Texts" sections provide truly authentic materials, some materials in the program are created particularly for the purpose of learning at the basic level and are thus more learner-friendly (e.g., more articulate speaking, less dialectal accents, and more standard use of language), than what Chinese native speakers will encounter in daily life. Therefore, teachers who are interested in more copious authentic language exposure will still need to supplement the textbooks with excerpts from Chinese news outlets, movies, magazines, and other such sources. As the ultimate goal is for the students to perform real-life tasks in Chinese, exposing students to unmodified, authentic Chinese content will speed up their transition from the more comfortable learner-Chinese discourse to the more challenging real-life Chinese discourse.

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