Xiaohong Wen. (2015) *Teaching Chinese as a Second Language: Curriculum Design & Instruction* [汉语作为第二语言教学：课程设计与教学实例]. Chicago: Phoenix Tree Publishing Inc. ISBN 978-1625750174, 364 pp. (paperback)

Reviewed by Xinjia Peng (University of Oregon)

This edited volume is a compilation of teacher resources that advocates language learning through use, and meaningful learning through real-world tasks. It contains lesson plans designed for a theme-based curriculum guided by principles of backward design. Together, fourteen AP and college Chinese language teachers contributed to the volume. The volume is intended as a reference book for use in guided-language teacher training and language teachers' professional development.

The highlight of this volume is in how it presents the articulation of backward design in a Chinese curriculum. Backward design was introduced to the CSL community only in the last few years, and is still unfamiliar to most teachers. As the first publication on the subject, this volume shows backward design in action in seventeen units of detailed lesson plans; it introduces the concept followed by an operable framework. I anticipate that it will transform how Chinese language teachers plan their classes, and in this sense, I believe the volume will have a long-lasting impact on the field.

All of the units in the book are consistently presented in a way that illustrates the process of backward design. There are two to three units presented under a theme. A typical unit starts by proposing one or more "essential questions," based on its theme. The essential questions are then translated into more operational and detailed "unit goals," outlining the real-life skills and cultural contents that students will learn in this unit. The unit goals are again articulated vis-à-vis the ACTFL 5Cs "Standards," stating specifically how the goal areas of *Connections*, *Comparisons*, *Culture*, and *Community* are attained in this unit. The next section, "Unit questions," lists language tasks that students are expected to be able to perform after finishing the unit. By clearly presenting the unit goals, standards, and unit questions, the book's design provides detailed planning that can be easily put into pedagogical action, and orients teaching towards an emphasis on language performance. A day-by-day lesson outline and day-to-day learning objectives follow, giving readers a good sense of the progression of the unit. I personally find the outline and objective sections extremely helpful as they show (1) how each day of class can both be self-contained yet connected to the other days, (2) how

Chinese as a Second Language (漢語教學研究—美國中文教師學會學報) 52:1 (2017), **100–104**.
DOI 10.1075/csl.52.1.06pen
ISSN 2451-828X / E-ISSN 2451-8298 © John Benjamins Publishing Company

more complicated skills are built upon more basic skills and (3) how the unit questions and unit goals can be broken down into smaller tasks and learning blocks – demonstrating, in essence, "the continuity of content throughout different levels" (p. iii). In the following section, detailed lesson plans are presented. In the unit by Zhao on dining (p. 113–30), only the lesson plan of the first day of class has been showcased as the "sample day." But in most other units, a "sample day" is presented alongside outlines of lesson plans for the other days. One or several functions are highlighted in the day's class, and a form is selected for a function based on the "Operational Principles" (p. ii) to avoid excessive input. Scaffolding activities build up skills that lead to the successful completion of tasks. Description of the class activities is given in full detail, including example sentences, in-class exercises, multimedia resources, and handouts. In some of the units, the authors have included a section that highlights the "Learning difficulty" of the day's class, while other units include details of homework assignments, or rubrics for grading speaking and writing if applicable. Finally, at the end of each theme, a "critique" by the editor evaluates the two (or three) units in the theme, and pinpoints the strengths and weaknesses of the lessons, focusing on how the designs intersect with SLA theories. This section effectively adds a theoretical dimension to the volume.

Another outstanding feature of the volume is the diversity it displays. This seems to be a response to the "increasingly diverse" (p. iii) backgrounds of learners, which can pose a problem when we try to address each student's individual needs. This volume proposes theme-based curriculum design as a solution, as it "provides continuity of content throughout different levels" (p. iii). The eight themes selected in this volume ("History and Modern Cities," "Chinese Gardens," "Dining," "Travel," "Shopping," "Time and Dates," "Hobbies," and "Family and Birthday") all showcase lesson plans that target different proficiency levels. The volume illustrates the execution of its theme-based design across different teaching contexts. For example, there is a five-week unit that allows learners to work on a specific task of the theme each week (p. 148), but there is also a two-session unit that finishes within a two-block schedule (102 minutes) (p. 3). The varied teaching contexts of these units also lead to different considerations in lesson planning. For instance, the number of heritage learners in a class would determine how much weight is given to learning vocabulary (p. 36); the age of the students would affect the strategies and time spent on classroom management (see some wonderful ideas in the unit by Fu, p. 3–29); in case of uneven proficiency levels in class, the teacher can also take advantage of peer learning, by pairing "a strong student with a less-engaged student" (p. 107) in discussion. All in all, while readers will not necessarily find all of these teaching contexts similar to their current classes, the diverse array of pedagogical considerations and decisions provides practical guidance for everyone to adapt to the changing reality of our teaching situations.

In addition, perhaps without attempting to do so, the book provides a toolkit of innovative ideas that shape the language classroom into a more dynamic, collaborative, interactive, and efficient learning community. Here are just a few examples of ideas that I found inspiring:

- involving students in assessment: allow students to participate in making rubrics (p. 9); have students select phrases for dictation (p. 11);
- collaborative learning: swap dictation and correct for each other (p. 11);
- innovative projects: 2D/3D rendering of a traditional Chinese garden (p. 53); conduct a food drive for a rural school in China (p. 95);
- multimedia resources (pictures, video clips) for the themes;
- CALL (computer-assisted language learning) tools: Google Drive to share class notes (p. 12); Socrative for in-class assessment (p. 62); ScreenFlow video for studying vocabulary before class (p. 100); an online number generator for assigning tasks (p. 105).

The volume also comes with an accompanying website, which posts teaching demos based on seven of the units. Readers of this book will undoubtedly find in it a wealth of resources.

In the following, I would like to, both as a learner and a reader, suggest some clarifications regarding key concepts in this volume. They can potentially help clear up some persisting confusion in the larger CSL community. The concepts in question concern backward design and task-based language teaching (TBLT).

First, regarding backward design, it is my personal opinion that the volume would be even more accessible if key concepts of backward design were introduced to the readers in more specific terms, especially the concepts of essential questions, unit goals, and unit questions. These are of particular importance because they are the guiding principles that underline backward design. The editor briefly touches upon some of these concepts (p. iv; p. vii); but as a reader, as I attempt to form an idea of, for instance, what essential questions are by reading the examples in the units, the concept only appears to become more ambiguous. The following two examples reveal a level of discrepancy in terms of the rhetoric: one unit poses as an essential question, "What is special about me and what do I share in common with others?" (p. 3); and another one, "How can a nation's geography impact its people's food sources and food preferences?" (p. 95). The former seems to be more open-ended and the latter is more controlled. Words such as "nation," "geography," "food sources," and "food preferences" seem to denote specific references and the word "impact" presents a one-directional causal relation as a prerequisite of the intended answer. This, potentially, might put a limit on the imagination of readers of those questions. The fundamental quality of "essential questions," according to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), is that they can "stimulate thought," "provoke

inquiry," and "spark more questions" (p. 106). To open up, rather than to close down a discussion, is more congruent with the philosophy of a theme-based curriculum. I am sure the editor is well aware of the potential diverse interpretations of "essential questions" among the book's contributors and I am here only expressing my views as a reader rather than giving any ready-made answers. I believe an appropriate amount of introduction to the concepts behind backward design, and minor recalibrating of some of its articulations, would effectively enhance the comprehensibility of the book's structure.

The other clarification request concerns the TBLT (task-based language teaching) component of this volume – specifically, what are the defining characteristics of *tasks* as exhibited in this volume? In general, the book represents the pedagogical view of learning through use, and gives prominence to "task-based instruction" (p. iv; p. viii). Furthermore, informed by research findings of second language acquisition (p. ii-iii), the approach this volume adopts emphasizes the role of scaffolding in preparing for tasks. "Activities consist of pre-, in-, and post-phases" (p. viii). In other words, the "in-task" phase is where the use of task for language learning takes place. Studies have shown that the difficulty teachers have in implementing TBLT in language classrooms may relate to problems in understanding what a task is (Ellis and Shintani, 2013), and this is certainly associated with the long-time absence of unified characterization of the term (Littlewood, 2004). The definition of a task can move along a continuum from focus on form ("enabling tasks" in Estaire & Zanon, 1994) to focus on meaning (Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2000, p. 195; Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 12; Shrum & Glisan, 2010, p. 266), with the latter increasingly becoming the dominant understanding. Some of the in-task activities in this volume (e.g. p. 43, p. 104–5, p. 119–120) might focus more on form instead of meaning, and could substantially deviate from the overall presentation of tasks in this volume.

Overall, however, I highly recommend this volume to all language teachers. Its holistic integration of backward design in Chinese language teaching, the diversity enabled by its theme-based curriculum, the richness of the examples, the details of the design, and the consistent articulation throughout the volume are all reasons to give it serious consideration.

References

Ellis, R. (2000). Task-based research and language pedagogy. *Language Teaching Research*, 4(3), 193–220. doi: 10.1177/136216880000400302

Ellis, R., & Shintani, N. (2013). *Exploring language pedagogy through second language acquisition research*. Oxon, UK: Routledge.

Estaire, S., & Zanon, J. (1994). *Planning classwork: A task-based approach*. Oxford, UK: Macmillan Heinemann.
Littlewood, W. (2004). The task-based approach: some questions and suggestions. *ELT Journal*, 58(4), 319–326. doi: 10.1093/elt/58.4.319
Shrum, J. L., & Glisan, E. W. (2010). *Teacher's handbook: Contextualized language instruction*. Boston, Mass: Heinle Cengage Learning.
Skehan, P. (1998). Task-based instruction. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 18, 268–86. doi: 10.1017/S0267190500003585
Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). *Doing task-based teaching*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Reviewer's address

Xinjia Peng
University of Oregon
308 Friendly Hall
Eugene, OR 97403

xinjia@uoregon.edu