

Activities as a vehicle for linguistic and sociocultural knowledge at the elementary level

Jingzi Huang *Monmouth University, New Jersey, USA*

This paper reports on a content-based elementary Chinese as a foreign language programme. It focuses on classroom language activities that are designed and implemented to serve the dual goals of language development and cultural learning. From a sociocultural perspective, it investigated how classroom activities are organized to integrate culture/content and language learning for young beginners. Two themes are highlighted in the discussion: (1) initial teacher planning vs. curriculum as experienced; (2) graphic organizers and language product. The result of the study throws light on the possibilities of a wide range of systematic form–function relations in the classroom, the integration of language and content learning, and on further directions for intentional planning in any other second or foreign language teaching programmes. It also reveals potential for implementing content-based foreign language instruction at the elementary level even in a situation where the teacher is still working on her own language proficiency.

I Introduction

Among the existing elementary foreign language programmes in North America, content-based language teaching has been recognized for many of its strengths which include reinforcing the elementary school curriculum (Heining-Boynton, 1992), serving as a foundation for relevance to the overall school programme (Kaiser, 1996; Arnall, 1992; Curtain and Martinez, 1989), promoting natural language learning and higher-order thinking skills (Met, 1991), and enabling students to attain a higher level of proficiency than their counterparts in regular elementary foreign language programmes (Reeves, 1989). However, with all these strengths over

Address for correspondence: School of Education, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, New Jersey 07764, USA; e-mail: jhuang@monmouth.edu

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traditional foreign language teaching, which mainly focuses on mastering the form of a language, a content-based approach is not readily embraced by a majority of teachers in practice. In the research area, while there exist numerous studies advocating content-based language instruction, major attention has been given to second language programmes such as ESL or those beyond the elementary levels (see Cantoni-Harvey 1987; Brinton, Snow and Wesche, 1989; Kidd, 1996; Richards, 1997; Brinton and Master, 1997; Stryker and Leaver, 1997). There are even fewer studies that provide detailed examination of a content-based elementary programme for young beginners in relation to curriculum design, the actual process of implementation, and the result of such implementation.

The present paper attempts to fill in the gap in the literature by examining an elementary 'Chinese as a Foreign Language' programme. Based on the belief that the concept of activities is central to education (Mohan, 1986), this paper will focus on classroom language activities that are designed and implemented to serve the dual goals of a foreign language programme: language development and cultural learning. Through a qualitative approach, the classroom activities are investigated from the perspective of foreign language teaching methodology.

II Background of the study

Advocated by studies (e.g., Mohan, 1986; Swain, 1974, 1978; 1988; Swain and Lapkin, 1981; Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1979, 1981, 1984; Dunn, 1987; Crandall, 1993, etc.) in language education and motivated by the new agenda in the national standards for foreign language education (NCSSFL, 1994; ACTFL, 1996), the idea of integrating language and content/culture learning in a second/foreign language programme has drawn attention from researchers (see Stryker and Leaver, 1997; Brinton and Master, 1997; Cantoni-Harvey, 1987; Snow and Brinton, 1997; Snow, Met and Genesee, 1989; Byram and Morgan, 1994; Genesee, 1994; Crandall, 1993). Very often, a content-based approach to language teaching is favoured on the assumption that 'through content teaching, second language learning will be enhanced' (Swain, 1988: 68). But, classroom research (Swain, 1988, 1996) reveals that

'content teaching is not necessarily good second language teaching'. To address the need of learning both content/culture and the target language, Swain calls for more 'carefully contrived activities, which bring into the classroom authentic language in its full functional range' (Swain, 1988: 82).

Among the research efforts to integrate language and content, the notion of *activity* (Ochs, 1988) has provided an integrating concept. From the perspective of 'language socialization' defined as 'socialization through the use of language and socialization to use language' (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986: 163), Ochs provides an activity model as follows:

Linguistic knowledge <—> Activity <—> Sociocultural knowledge

This model illustrates that 'sociocultural and linguistic knowledge structures activity, and activity creates... and recreates... knowledge in both of these domains' (Ochs, 1988: 16). To apply this activity model to a foreign language programme that embraces the dual goals of learning both culture and language, it is obvious that the design of classroom activities plays a crucial role in enabling students to gain both linguistic capabilities and cultural understanding in the target language.

Existing models or frameworks, such as the one proposed by Snow, Met and Genesee (1989), have offered useful insights on the possibility of integrating language and content in language instruction. Nevertheless, at the pedagogical level, the question facing a classroom language teacher is specifically how classroom activities can be organized to ensure that the learning of culture/content and language takes place systematically. From a sociocultural perspective, drawn from the work in the field of anthropology and functional linguistics, Mohan (1986) proposed a Framework of Knowledge Structures, or the Knowledge Framework (KF), which serves as an analysis of activity. According to Mohan, action and theoretical understanding are two aspects of an activity. Practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge are the two sides of the KF. 'The two aspects of an activity, action and theoretical understanding, match the two sides of the framework' (Mohan, 1986: 42). Thus, the KF can be perceived as a general model of activity which provides contexts for discourse. This model serves as a basis for the design of classroom work.

Mohan further argues that an activity can be divided into at least six major types of Knowledge Structures (KSs) or knowledge processes: describing, sequencing, making choices, classifying, formulating principles and evaluating. A topic or content area can also be broken down into six types of knowledge which make up the KF: description, sequence and choice, associated with the action situation of an activity; and classification, principles and evaluation, associated with the background information of the action situation. Since each knowledge structure has its distinct linguistic features, the particular language attached to that KS is required while engaged in an activity falling in that category. The KF provides linkage between language and content.

Some research studies (e.g., Early, 1990; Early, Mohan and Hooper, 1989; Mohan, 1990; Tang, 1997) have suggested that the KF is a helpful perspective to organize activities to bring about systematic integration of content learning and language development. However, most of these studies were conducted in ESL situations. Few demonstrate specifically how teaching is planned around the KF and reveal the dynamics of the whole process of implementing the plan in the classroom. Even fewer address intentionally planned integration in a foreign language learning and teaching situation. As for the potentials of the KF in a foreign language teaching programme for young beginners, research simply has not been done.

III The study

The study was conducted to investigate foreign language teacher planning and classroom processes of language activities organized around Mohan's Knowledge Framework for young beginners. The term 'activity' is used to refer specifically to classroom language activities defined as pieces of classroom work accompanied by use of language with specific objectives (such as to classify people or sequence daily events) undertaken as part of a language course. Such activities, viewed from the perspective of 'language socialization', 'play a mediating role' (Ochs, 1988: 17) between cultural/content message construction and language use. Thus, for instance, through participation in an activity of classifying people, children would acquire the knowledge of how a group of people

might be classified and use the linguistic features associated with the KS of classification. The focus of this paper is on the planning and implementation of such defined activities. Student discourse, both oral and written, will be presented to reveal the result of such implementation. However, detailed analysis of systematic form–function relations in students’ written discourse contextualized by the conducted classroom activities is provided in a separate article (Mohan and Huang, 2002) due to limitation of space in this article.

The major concern of the study was how a content-based language programme using Mohan’s KF would bring about the integration of language and culture learning more systematically in classroom settings. The underlying assumption of the programme is that of a sociocultural theory which views language learning as a result of language practices ‘engendered by grammatical, discourse, sociocultural, and general cognitive structures’ which are ‘created in part through children’s participation in temporarily and spatially situated practices/activities’ (Ochs, 1988: 17). Thus, very different from a language-based approach where linguistic items and prescribed language performance levels would be used as the starting point for curriculum development, the one under the study based its curriculum on socioculturally organized activities. A content topic that is socially and/or culturally relevant would be the starting point for curriculum development. Then the topic was broken down into the six basic KSs as proposed by the KF to resemble the wide range of language functions and cognitive structures of human activities. It was anticipated that classroom language activities designed as such would overcome a major weakness associated with a language-oriented programme where cultural content learning is either ignored or separated from language acquisition.

IV Methodology

An ethnographic approach, more specifically field study, was adopted as the main research methodology. While providing a detailed analytical descriptive narrative of the actual teaching and learning situation, this paper intends to increase understanding of how teachers plan and implement tasks aimed at language and

content integration. The study was also an action research (Lather, 1991): my active participation as a researcher in the field has inevitably affected the way the activities were designed and implemented.

The study was undertaken in a natural setting of an elementary school in Canada. It involved 73 fifth and sixth graders at the age of 9 to 11, who were attending regular classes at the school. All the participants, two of whom were from a Chinese background, were native speakers of English. Though there were a few Mandarin Chinese speakers (ESL students) in the school, for most of the students in the programme, the Chinese class provided the only opportunity for the children to be in touch with Chinese. Thus, Chinese was taught and learned as a foreign language. The teacher is a Canadian-born Chinese whose strongest language is English. During the time of the study, she herself was taking college-level Chinese language courses to improve her proficiency level. The Chinese teacher, the students and the researcher met twice a week for instruction. Each lesson lasted 40 minutes.

The programme was in its second year when data collection started. Data were collected during a period of eight months from October to May, and it included lesson plans, informal interview, field notes and discourse data from student interactions and written work. 'Inductive analysis' (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989: 415) was used for establishing the patterns, themes and categories, such as teacher intention, students' attitudes, the kinds of activities designed and conducted, student discourse produced as a result of engaging in the activities, and functions or semantic relations realized through certain linguistic features exhibited in student discourse.

V Data presentation and analysis

Data presentation in the following is organized and limited to highlight two of the themes that gradually emerged during the process of data collection and analysis: (1) initial teacher planning vs. curriculum as experienced; (2) graphic organizers and language product.

1 Teacher planning vs. curriculum as experienced

a Initial planning For the Chinese programme under review, the teacher and the researcher were responsible for everything, ranging from choosing materials to providing a time frame for teaching units. All classroom activities were co-designed by the teacher and the researcher. Following the *Mandarin Chinese Intermediate Program Curriculum Guide* (Ministry of Education of BC, 1991),¹ which is organized around a series of themes or topics identified as relevant or interesting to elementary students, we attempted to cover as many topics as possible. For every topic covered, we were to use the KF to organize activities, that is, we were to have the students engage in activities of classification, description, principles, sequence, evaluation and choice.

Our initial planning started with activities of describing and classifying on the topic of Personal Information (PI), which actually included the topics of Clothing, School and Family. In the *Curriculum Guide*, PI, School and Family are listed as different topics. Since all three topics had been touched on in the previous year, putting them together for a general review was perceived to be a logical way to begin a new year. For these students, communication about their personal life normally included their school life and family life. We saw potential for more language involvement by combining them to form one topic.

Data show that the original plan distributed 4 lessons to the activities of description and classification and intended to cover the topic of PI within 15 lessons. In reality, it took 17 lessons to conduct the activities of classifying and describing, 14 lessons for sequencing, and 3 lessons for evaluating and choosing. Activities of principles were conducted in a small group (in 4.5 lessons of 20 minutes) due to the limited class time. Some tasks related to the classifying activity were also conducted in the small group, which took 2.5 lessons of 20 minutes. Thus, the total number of lessons on the topic of Personal Information, including those conducted in the small group, was 41 instead of 15 as originally expected.

On the surface, the huge gap between the initial planning and the actual teaching is very surprising. However, when the actual teaching was examined on a more detailed level, the emerging picture turned out to illustrate a very comprehensible curriculum. Instead of being strictly dominated by a pre-determined plan, the

curriculum was gradually developed in the process of actual teaching where implementation of activities was negotiated depending on students' linguistic and sociocultural knowledge.

VI Curriculum as experienced

The actual teaching in the year went well beyond the topic of PI. To highlight the major theme of this paper, classroom language activities around the KF, the following discussion will focus mainly on the activities dealing with Personal Information.

For the topic of Personal Information, activities for all the six major KSs were designed and conducted (see Figure 1 for a summary of these activities). We started with the activity of description. The students engaged in activities of describing themselves and their classmates by name, sex, nationality, age, grade, clothing, etc. They were also invited to describe their family members in a similar way. Based on the information thus obtained, the students were then asked to classify their classmates into different groups, such as by gender, by those who attended school to study, by those who worked after school (i.e., helping out at home to earn allowance, as defined by the students). This classification was actually based on the information provided by the previous description activity.

For the KSs of Principles and Sequence, the students were first invited to sequence their daily activities, or essentially to provide an account of their daily routine. Based on the information from the sequencing activity, the students were asked to choose three basic major daily events and explain the reasons they engage in them regularly. The activities of Principles and Sequence gave the students a chance to become more familiar with their own and their classmates' daily lives. This familiarity prepared the students for the final step, to compare and evaluate their own daily life and the one in China. For the last step, the daily life of a Chinese elementary school student was introduced to the students. Then the students were asked to compare and contrast their own daily life and that of a student in the target culture. Based on this comparison, the students were invited to show their personal preference for daily lifestyles. At this point the whole topic was completed.

These activities were designed and conducted around the KF to embrace both cultural/content learning and language development. From the standpoint of culture/content learning, the students had a chance to learn about their classmates, to obtain general information about their class, to share information on their daily routines, to explore the logic and reasons behind their major daily events, to learn about student life in the target culture, to make a cultural comparison based on the information obtained through the use of the target language, and to share their personal preferences based on their values. The description and classification activities were ideal to use first because the students attending the Chinese class came from different groups and hence the knowledge about one other was relatively limited. While engaging in these activities, the students were using the language not only for practising certain forms of language, but also to obtain

Classification	Principles	Evaluation
Classifying people into those who attend school and those who don't; those who work and those who don't. (O/W)	Explaining the reasons you engage in the three major daily activities. (O/W)	Evaluating your daily life and the one of a Chinese elementary school student by comparing and contrasting the two kinds of daily life. (O)
Describing yourself and your classmates by name, age, sex, grade, nationality, etc. (O/W) Describing yourself and/or your family. (O/W)	Sequencing your daily activities. (O/W)	Showing your personal preference for the kind of daily life. (O)
Description	Sequence	Choice

Note: O: Oral texts produced by students.
W: Written texts produced by students.

Figure 1 Activities conducted around the KF on the topic of personal information

social information about each other. The activities of comparing and contrasting students' daily lives in different cultures provided a social context in which the students exchanged cross-cultural information and formed personal conclusions based on this newly gained social cultural knowledge.

From the perspective of language development, the activities around various KSs provided the students with opportunities to use the language associated with different KSs for true communicative purposes. (For specific analysis on student use of the target language, especially in terms of form–function relations, see Huang (1996).) Students used particular items of the target language in order to engage successfully in socially and culturally meaningful activities. In addition, since the activities of KSs require various thinking skills, such as classifying, observing, interpreting, sequencing, comparing, contrasting and evaluating, the students were involved not only socioculturally and linguistically, but also cognitively.

Although these activities appeared straightforward and relatively simple on paper (see Figure 1), they were not conducted with the expected ease in the actual setting. Numerous steps had to be taken in order to facilitate the students' engagement. Students were actually involved in a series of tasks before an activity of any KS could be completed. Let us take for example the activities of Description and Classification.

Activities of Description conducted in regular classes involved 6 major tasks as shown in Figure 2. These six tasks were spread out into 17 lessons (see Figure 3 for a summary of the relevant part in the 17 lessons) and a task might have been started without another one being finished. Here, it is important to keep in mind the fact that the time for each lesson was not solely spent on the KS activities. Frequently, after other business was conducted, such as taking attendance, checking homework, dealing with characters and practising calligraphy, there were only 20 minutes left. In addition, since the students met only twice a week for Chinese and had difficulty finding a person to practise with outside the class, it always took some time for the students to warm up before they could engage in the planned language activities.

Several points stand out in the data analysis on the initial planning versus that experienced. The first is concerned with the

huge gap between the initial plan and the actual teaching. There are several reasons for the existence of this gap. First, the initial plan only outlined some activities in relation to the KF. It was a plan based on what had been done before and what we believed should be done next instead of being based on the present situation of the classes and the students. In the actual teaching, existing factors became the dominant elements directing the curriculum. Such factors included the students' ability to understand the tasks, linguistic demands on the students, discipline problems induced by group work, the limited time for the students to meet for the Chinese class, lack of opportunity to practise the language outside the class, and the requirement of assigning no homework from the administration. All these issues thwarted the implementation of the initial plan. Thus, to meet the students' needs, the teachers had to alter the plan. The analysis shows that the alterations of the initial plan were not undertaken without legitimate reasons. In fact, the initial plan was employed as a guideline to start the teaching and it was during the actual teaching when the teachers and the students interacted that a live curriculum as experienced was gradually developed. Without an initial plan, there could not have been a starting point. Without interacting with the students in the actual teaching, the teachers could not have obtained the

Task	Content of the Tasks
Task 1	Find out personal information of some students in class by filling out a chart of classification and description (Chart 1) through interacting with each other
Task 2	Find out personal information of all the students in class by filling out a big C/D chart (Chart 1b) for the whole class
Task 3	Introduce family members (Chart 2)
Task 4	Guessing game: Guess who is described according to the available information on clothing (Chart 3)
Task 5	Guessing game: Guess who is described according to all the available personal information
Task 6	Describe yourself in a written paragraph

Figure 2 Tasks involved in the activity of description

information as a basis to develop a curriculum as it was being experienced. In this case, the initial planning served to guide the initial classroom instruction. Information obtained through classroom instruction in return served to help develop the curriculum which was to be used to guide subsequent instruction. This cyclic process can also be explained from the perspective of

Lesson	Content of the related part of the lessons	Related tasks
L1	Review asking for personal information	T1, T2
L2	Demonstrating how to fill out a C/D chart; students filling out the chart by interacting with each other	T2
L3	Guessing game: which member of the family is described	T3
L4	Students coming up in pairs to introduce each other; information recorded by a third student onto the big chart for the whole class	T2
L5	Reviewing numbers; continuing the big chart	T2
L6	Continuing the big chart	T2
L7	Introducing vocabulary of clothing	T4
L8	Review vocabulary of clothing	T4
L9	Introducing colours; the big chart continuing	T4, T2
L10	Review colours; describe by clothing; the big chart	T4, T2
L11	The big chart; review colours and clothes; Guessing game: guess who is described by clothing	T2, T4
L12	Review colours and clothes; students writing an anonymous paragraph describing themselves	T5
L13	The big chart; Guessing game: using the anonymous paragraphs	T2, T5
L14	The big chart; Guessing game: using the anonymous paragraphs	T2, T5
L15	The big chart	T2
L16	Finish the big chart	T2
L17	Test: write a paragraph describing yourself	T6

Figure 3 The content of the relevant part of the lessons on description

'language socialization'. Classroom activities were initially organized by the teachers according to their understanding of students' linguistic and sociocultural knowledge. In practice however, it is the students' actual command of their linguistic and sociocultural knowledge that in essence structured the activities. As a result of engaging in all these activities, students' linguistic and sociocultural knowledge (which is Chinese and social cultural understanding of the content topic, in this case) was created and recreated, and the recreated knowledge became the factor that determined the engagement of the subsequent activities. This finding indicates that language and cultural learning may be carefully planned but the ultimate learning result, or progress, depends on the students' possession of the target language abilities and cultural knowledge, which have a great impact on the actual implementation of the activities.

From the viewpoint of a more language-based programme, one may argue that the large gap is due to unrealistic expectations for novice learners with regard to language performance. However, it is important to keep in mind that the programme was content-based, which essentially means that the curriculum was not organized around linguistic items or language performance levels defined from a purely linguistic perspective. The linguistic needs were not predetermined by the teacher or a performance guideline but identified by all involved when content-oriented activities were conducted. Although it may be true that for a novice learner a single word is easier to handle than a sentence, if language is viewed as only a system of forms, nevertheless, from the viewpoint of 'language socialization', language is learned in context, being used to engage in socioculturally meaningful activities. Though some authoritative proficiency guidelines such as the one of ACTFL may specify the novice performance level as characterized by isolated words (which may be very useful for evaluation purposes), they should not be used to prohibit the curriculum and activities from going beyond isolated words to embrace discourse, if language is viewed as functional and meaningful. It is true that the tasks described in the study were linguistically challenging at the beginning, but the students managed to overcome many barriers and eventually use the target language successfully to engage in content-oriented activities.

The second point that has emerged is concerned with the distribution of time for activities of different KSs. Obviously, time was a very important element: the teachers decided when to start and when to stop a certain activity. While all the activities of the three KSs in action situations at the practical level (i.e., Description, Sequence, and Choice) were conducted in regular classes, no time was available for the activities of Classification and Principles. It seems that priority was likely to be given, as in most language programmes, to the activities in action situations. However, to have students engage in various cognitive skills and to bring about a broader range of form–function relations in language use, it is important for students to participate in activities of the KSs at the theoretical level. Lessons conducted in the small group show that it is possible to do so. Nevertheless, we cannot expect that the students should automatically engage in the activities of giving reasons for actions. It is a skill that has to be taught and learned. Lessons have to be intentionally planned to make it happen.

The third point is concerned with the use of many teaching techniques for language learning. Though the lessons were conducted on the basis of activities organized around the KF, many language teaching techniques similar to those found in more traditional foreign language classrooms, such as pattern drills, translation, question and answer, and repeating after the teacher, were involved. The teacher was very well aware that these techniques might not be favoured in a content-based programme where authentic use of the target language is the linguistic goal. However, she felt that they were sometimes effective in aiding students to overcome some immediate linguistic barriers that might prohibit students from successfully engaging in content-oriented activities. Unlike in a more traditional programme where these techniques are used to have students practise the linguistic forms in isolation, the teacher used them only when communication broke down or could not be carried on due to inadequate linguistic capabilities. For instance, when incorrect use of tones or vocabulary words by a student might cause misunderstanding, the teacher would ask for clarification and/or offer the correct version for the student to repeat. Many times, a student would repeat after the teacher without being asked and

then immediately apply the skill in the activities he or she was engaging in. The same observation was also made for the use of translation: it was not used on a regular basis for checking comprehension as in a traditional programme but it was provided when necessary. For instance, a student involved in a guessing game might ask for the Chinese version of a certain type of clothing when describing a classmate. This kind of translation aims at helping students continue in activity involvement rather than facilitating comprehension. In general, the selection of teaching techniques was dominated by the needs of the students while engaging in activities. The seemingly more traditional techniques served very different purposes in the programme and the extent to which they were used was very often determined by the linguistic and sociocultural knowledge possibly required by the activities.

VII Graphic organizers in relation to content learning and the student use of the target language

To help the students successfully engage in the language activities around the KF, many visual aids were employed. Graphics in the form of charts were designed for both content construction and language production. A total of 15 charts were designed and used for activities for the six KSs in the unit of Personal Information. In addition, flash cards and pictures were also used as visual aids to help understanding and language practice. Data analysis shows that when being used appropriately, visuals play a powerful role in mediating language and content/cultural information for the students. In the following, a few examples will be used to illustrate how the graphics worked to help with content construction and language production. Let us look at Appendix 1 first.

Appendix 1 was used for a guessing game. A large completed chart was put on the board. One student was invited at a time to give clues using the chart. The student was supposed to provide clues by means of producing a cluster of sentences based on the information on the chart, but the title of the family member was to be kept secret for the audience to guess. Example 1 shows how a student orally provided clues using the chart.

Example 1 (tape: 31 Oct. 1991)

- Ta shi nanhai.* [He is a boy.]
Ta shi, ta bushi nühai. [He is, he is not a girl.]
Ta shi, shi sui. [He is, ten years old.]
Tade shengri liu yue qi hao. [His birthday is June 7.]
Ta shi Jianada ren. [He is a Canadian.]
Ta bu gongzuo. [He does not work.]
Ta shangxue. [He attends school.]
Ta shishei? [Who is he?]

In this task, every clue giver had a chance to use the target language as discourse, that is, an oral text made up of coherently related sentences produced in a specific context. To be able to engage in the guessing game, the audience had to understand what was said by the clue giver and what was written on the chart in order to match the provided clues to the correct family member on the chart. This is a task that was both linguistically and cognitively demanding and the students enjoyed it.

Appendix 3 was designed and used for activities of Classification. Based on the completion of Appendix 2, which is the completed Classification and Description chart for the whole class, the students had to complete Appendix 3. First, we discussed who should be counted as the people making up the class. The students decided to include the two teachers as part of the class. Though the teachers came to school everyday, they did not necessarily *shangxue* (attend school to study). Following the discussion, the students were invited to talk about the charts, using classification language. After demonstrating how to do it, I asked the students to do the same. They made a few mistakes such as omitting measure words. However, they did a good job in terms of producing a cluster of sentences logically connected to a topic. This was shown by the following example:

Example 2 (tape: 21 May 1992)

- Women ban you ershisan ge ren.*
Shangxue, shangxue ershier ge ren.
Ershier ge ren shangxue.
Yi bu shang, yi ge bu shangxue.
Shangxue de ren san ge, you san ge gongzuo.
Shangxue de ren you ershi bu gongzuo.

Gongzuo de ren, gongzuo de ren ling nanhai.

Gongzuo de ren you san nuhai.

Bu gongzuo de ren you liu nanhai, liu ge nanhai.

Bu gongzuo, bu gongzuo de, de men, de ren you shisi nu hai.

[Our class has 23 people. Attending school, attending school, 22 people. 22 people attend school. One does not attend, one does not attend school. Attending school people, 3, 3 work. Attending school people, 20 do not work. Working people, there is 0 boy. Working people, there are three girls. Non working people, there are six boys, six boys. Non working, non working, men, people, there are 14 girls.]

The above oral text was produced in 2 minutes with the help of Appendix 3. The students felt the task challenging, which was shown by their facial expression such as giving a grimace, but after they completed it, they felt proud, exclaiming ‘I did it! I can’t believe it!’

Graphics were also designed and used to help students obtain cross-cultural information in order to make personal decisions based on cross-cultural comparison. Appendix 4 was used for constructing knowledge about student life in the target culture after a written text about Lili, a Chinese elementary school student, was introduced to the students.

The chart is actually a form of graphic representation of the Text (Appendix 5). From the perspective of content construction, the chart helped the students understand the content message conveyed in the Text. Though there were only five new vocabulary items in the Text and the meaning of each was provided at the bottom, most of the students had a difficult time comprehending how Lili’s life in China was different from their own lives when reading the Text. However, after working with a partner to complete Chart 11, they seemed to have a much better understanding of the difference between the students in China and Canada. Looking at their completed Chart 11, several students made the similar comment about their peers in China, ‘Don’t they play at all?’ This level of understanding was not observed when the students were just reading the Text. From the perspective of language production, the chart helped the students retell the Text without having to depend on a good memory. Since the chart makes the content well organized, the task of talking about Lili’s daily life became less demanding. The following example shows

what a student orally produced with the help of the completed Chart 11.

Example 3 (tape: 28 May 1992)

Zaoshang qi dian sishiwu, Lili qichuang, uh—, hou chuanyi, ranhou shuaya, xilian (not clear). Qidian sishiwu ta qu shangxue. Shangwu ha dian, ha dian Lili kaishi shangke. Radian dao, dao shier dian ta shangke. Zhongwu shier dian dao er, liang, liang dian ta chi wufan, ranhou xiuxi. Xiawu er (T: Liang), liang dian dao si dian ta, uh—, Lili shangke. Si dian d/IO wu, wu dian hou kewai, zuo, zuo gongke. Wu dian, wu dian dao (not clear). Wanshang liu dian dao qi dian, ta, uh—, Lili chi wanfan. Ranhou qi dian dao jiu dian ta (not clear) zuo gongke. Yeli jiu dian dao shi dian, Lili shuaya, ranhou xizao. Zuihou shi dian ta shuijiao.

[Early in the morning at seven forty five, Lili gets up, uh—, then puts on her clothes, then brushes her teeth, washes her face (not clear). At seven forty five, she goes to school. In the morning at eight, at eight Lili begins to have class. From eight to, to twelve she has classes. At noon from twelve to two, two, two she eats lunch, then rests. In the afternoon at two, from two to four, she, uh—, Lili has classes. After, from four to five, five after class, does, does homework. Five, from five (not clear). In the evening from six to seven, she, uh—, Lili eats supper. Then from seven to nine she (not clear) does homework. At night nine to ten, Lili brushes her teeth, then takes a bath. At last at ten she goes to sleep.]

A student produced this long speech in just 1 minute. Though not perfect, the passage conveyed the content message very clearly and all the sentences were coherently organized. The language associated with the KS of sequence was heavily involved (see Huang (1996) for detailed discourse analysis). When the student finished, he had a proud smile on his face.

Using a large number of visual aids is an important feature in the teaching process. While pictures and flash cards helped the students relate sounds in an unfamiliar language to the concepts they had learned in their first language, the graphics such as the charts helped students to understand new concepts or the content message conveyed by a text and helped them to organize their thoughts and language when interacting in the target language. These graphics were organizers for both content and language.

From the perspective of content or cultural learning, these graphics played a role in lowering the linguistic demand on the

students when understanding was the focus. For instance, Chart 2 (see Appendix 1) is made up of two parts: a table on the top and a classification chart on the bottom. The chart at the bottom shows very clearly that there is a big difference when people address their grandparents from different sides in Chinese. From this chart, even without any instruction from the teacher, the students could easily see the existence of this difference. Of course if the students would like to understand why such a difference exists, they would have to turn to the experts (in this case, the teachers) for help. In fact, the teacher did give a short lecture on Chinese culture regarding this difference when questioned by the students: the word *wai*, which means ‘outside’, comes from the idea that once a woman is married to a man, she automatically becomes a member of the man’s family (which includes the man’s parents) and is thus no longer considered as being from inside of her original family. If at the bottom of the chart there was a string of Chinese words conveying the same message, it would be hard to imagine that the students could see the difference as easily as they did.

From the perspective of language development, these graphics helped the students to use the target language beyond the level of words, phrases and even sentences. Very often, students’ language output was a complete discourse situated in a specific context and associated with a certain KS, as shown by not only the examples provided above but by the written texts below as well:

Example 4

Wo ban you 23 ge ren, 21 ge ren shangxue, 2 ge ren bu shang xue. Shangxue de ren you 3 ge ren gongzuo, 20 ge ren bu gongzuo. Bu gongzuo de ren you 14 ge ren shi nuhai, 6 ge ren shi nanhai. Gongzuo de ren you 3 ge ren shi nuhai, 0 ge ren shi naihai.

[Our class has 23 people, (there are) 21 people (who) attend school, 2 (who) do not attend school. (Among) those who attend school, (there) exists 3 people (who) work, twenty people (who) do not work. (Among) those who do not work, (there) exists 14 people (who) are girls, 6 people (who) are boys. (Among) those who work, (there) exists 3 people (who) are girls, 0 (who) are boys.]

Example 5

Zaoshang, 7:45 wo xian qichang. Ranhou chuanyi. 8:00 wo xishou. Ranhou shuaya. 8:15 wo shangxue qian chi zaofan. Zuihou shangxuele. Shangwu, 8:45 wo xian shangke. Ranhou kejianxiuyi. 10:30, wo shangke hou chi wufan.

Zhongwu, 12:05 wo xian chi wufan. Ranhou wan. 1:00 wo shangke hou zuo jiating gongke, ranhou wan. Xiawu, 4:00 dao 6:00 wo zuo gongfu. Ranhou chi wanfan.

Wanshang, 7:00 wo xian xizao, ranhou dushu. 8:30 wo kan dianshi. Yeli, 9:45 wo zhunbei shuijiao, zhuihou shuijiao.

[Early in the morning, at 7:45, I first get up, then get dressed. At 8:00, I wash hands, then brush teeth. At 8:15, before I go to school, I eat breakfast. At last, I go to school. In the morning, at 8:45, I first have class, then recess. At 10:30, after I have class, I eat lunch.

At noon, at 12:05, I first eat lunch, then play. At 1:00, after I have class, I do homework, then play. In the afternoon, from 4:00 to 6:00, I do kungfu, then eat supper.

In the evening, at 7:00, I first take a bath, then read books. At 8:30, I watch TV. At night, I prepare to go to bed. At last I sleep.]

Example 4 was completed as homework after Example 2 was produced in class. Example 5 was completed after the students developed a sequence chart of their own daily events. Both are complete written discourses that clearly entail the corresponding KSs, classification and sequence. A detailed discourse analysis of these texts has revealed students' capability to use the appropriate linguistic features associated with different KSs (see Mohan and Huang (2002) for details). With the help of the graphics, some of the texts they produced were quite long, considering the students' proficiency level in Chinese. These graphics helped the students to organize the content they communicated and thus lowered the demand of the task on the students. To communicate in a foreign language is not an easy task for a beginner. Both the form of the language and the message to be communicated about in the language have to be handled simultaneously. The graphics that were used in the unit helped them to organize the content and thus made the tasks of using the target language to communicate less demanding. As a result, producing longer discourses became possible for the students, which is not often the case in a more traditional programme, where words and sentences are more the focus for beginners rather than language use at the discourse level.

The usefulness of visual aids has been recognized for quite a long time in second or foreign language teaching (see, for example, Dale, 1954; Corder, 1966; Johnson and Morrow, 1981; Wright, 1989; Freeman and Freeman, 1998; Richards and Rodgers 2001). What has been revealed by this study is that the power of visual aids can go beyond helping students understand the meaning of a vocabulary item or a particular concept. It can help situate a particular language item in a specific context so the understanding of that item helps with the total comprehension of the discourse. Furthermore, these charts are graphic representations of various KSs around which the activities were organized and conducted. They represent the way people organize their knowledge. If we say that the activities organized around the KF provided the students with opportunities to use the language associated with various KSs, then the graphics facilitated the actual use of the target language associated with various KSs.

Data analysis also reveals a weakness of the task implementation from the perspective of using language for authentic communication. The following interaction is a small portion of a 6-minute conversation which was elicited by the task of filling out one row in Chart 1.

Example 6 (tape: 29 Oct. 1991)

I was working with two boys.

Sa: *Ni jiao shenmo mingzi?* [What is your name?]

Sb: *Wo jiao ____.* [I am called ____.]

Sa: *Shi, shi, Ni shi nanhai ma?* [Are, are, are you a boy?]

Sb: *Wo—, Wo—,* [I, I,]

Sa: Don't go *bu*, because if you go *bu*

T: Don't tell him. Don't tell him.

Ab: *Wo—, ok, I know now. Wo nanhai.* [I boy.]

Sa: *Wo bu* [I no]

Sb: [confidently] *Wo shi nanhai.* [I am a boy.] . . .

When comparing the task of completing Chart 1 (Appendix 2) with the guessing game, it is obvious the oral production resulting from Chart 1 does not reflect the characteristics of conversation in authentic communication. Originally, the chart was designed to help students retain information about each other in an organized way and use the chart to facilitate the classification activity that

was to follow. However, most students used the chart as a guide to engage in conversation without even realizing it made little sense to ask questions for the already obtained information. By contrast, the guessing game is a much more authentic task which students enjoyed much more. It went well beyond simply labelling and challenged students to use their target language skills as a vehicle for acquiring information and as a tool for thinking (Snow, Met and Genesee, 1989). An analysis of the videotaped instructional procedures indicates a possible weakness in the instruction instead of the chart itself. The students had not been specifically directed to use the chart to obtain only necessary information. Based on their understanding of completing a worksheet in a classroom setting, the students naturally tried their best to have every single blank filled, which resulted in an unexpected length of time to complete the task. This finding indicates that sometimes students engage in certain activities which they may not fully understand. What is designed to elicit conversation for authentic communication may become a restriction hindering authentic communication, depending on students' understanding of the activity.

VIII Summary and conclusion

A content-based approach was adopted in the elementary 'Chinese as a foreign language' programme that was investigated. In this programme teaching was planned on the basis of relevant thematic topics instead of linguistic units. Once a topic was chosen, it was broken down into six types of knowledge or knowledge structures, and a series of language activities around the KSs was designed. Thus, the KF was used as an organizational framework for classroom activities.

For the unit under study, activities were designed for the KSs involved in both action situations and theoretical background. To engage in activities of describing, sequencing and choosing in action situations, the students also had to be involved with the KSs of classification, principles and evaluation, which provide the relevant background information of the activities. Mohan points out, 'language learning in action situations is . . . more than learning to speak appropriately. It includes talking about and learning about

reasons for acting' (Mohan, 1986: 55). In other words, to learn a language through activities, two aspects are involved. One is to learn to use the target language to act, such as to describe, to sequence and to make choices. The other aspect is to develop a theoretical understanding of the actions to be taken and the ability to talk about this understanding. Very often, second or foreign language teaching stops at the action level and hence limits the range of form–function relations in students' target language development. The study shows that intentional planning of teaching around the KF can help to overcome this problem.

Let us take the activities of sequence and principles as an example. In the case of sequence, the students were invited to sequence their daily events in the form of a journal. This activity provided the students with the opportunities for the use of the language of sequence, which is the language used in action situations. However, the teaching did not stop at sequence. The students were further required to talk about the reasons behind their daily events. By thinking and talking about reasons, the students were led to engage in a higher-level cognitive activity, that is, principles. It is worth mentioning that talking about reasons behind daily events did not occur automatically after the activity of sequencing daily events. Without intentional planning to make it happen, the students might not have engaged in a principles activity at all. Without engaging in principles activity, the students could not have gained the opportunity to use the language associated with principles. Classroom activities have to be intentionally organized to cover a variety of KSs in order to provide the students with opportunities for the use of language associated with a variety of KSs.

Though teaching has to be planned, the actual implementation of the designed activities might not strictly follow the time frame as expected, depending on the real situation of the classes and the students' linguistic and sociocultural knowledge. This finding complements the sociocultural theory of language learning which emphasizes that 'sociocultural and linguistic knowledge structures activity, and activity creates... and recreates... knowledge in both of these domains' (Ochs, 1988: 16).

The use of graphic organizers is another important aspect of the implementation of the plan. The analysis shows that graphic

organizers used as ‘a package carrying information’, ‘a focus on the core of the content’, ‘a display of essential information without dense language involved’, and ‘an explicit depiction of relationships’ (Early, Mohan and Hooper, 1986) helped the students understand content, organize content information, and produce longer discourse. For every KS, there were graphic organizers to go with them. These graphic organizers first served as worksheets which the students had to complete by using the target language. They also helped students understand the message content better. Then, the completed worksheets were used as visual aids to help the students organize ideas or content and language to produce longer discourse. These graphic organizers of different KSs played a very important role in helping the students to produce the discourse of different KSs. Thus, by engaging in the activities around a variety of KSs, even novice learners are capable of going beyond word/sentence level and producing longer discourses expressing a variety of functions (see Huang (1996) and Mohan and Huang (2002) for detailed analysis of form–function connections).

Weaknesses are also revealed in relation to the implementation of designed activities. The study shows that an understanding of the purpose of an activity is necessary if the students are to engage in it and fulfil the original instructional purposes. A task designed to engage students in authentic use of the target language may not be carried out to materialize the intention. Explicit instruction is crucial.

In sum, a content topic is the starting point of a teaching plan. Around the chosen topic, activities have to be intentionally planned to cover a variety of KSs in order to provide opportunities for a wider range of language functions in student discourse. The plan has to adapt to the actual situations of classes and students, and graphic organizers that accompany the KSs are a key to the successful implementation of the plan.

The study is the first attempt to investigate in detail the application of the KF in a foreign language teaching situation. Through the presentation of classroom processes and students’ language product, it opens a window through which one might perceive the dynamics of the application of the KF in an actual foreign language classroom. Though the study was undertaken to

examine an elementary 'Chinese as a foreign language' programme, the result of the study does shed light on the possibilities of a wide range of language functions in the classroom, the integration of language and content learning, and on further directions for intentional planning in any other second or foreign language teaching programmes. It also reveals potential for implementing content-based foreign language instruction at the elementary level even in a situation where the teacher is still working on her own language proficiency.

Note

¹ The label 'Intermediate' in the document refers to the grade level 4–7.

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Appendix 1: Chart 2

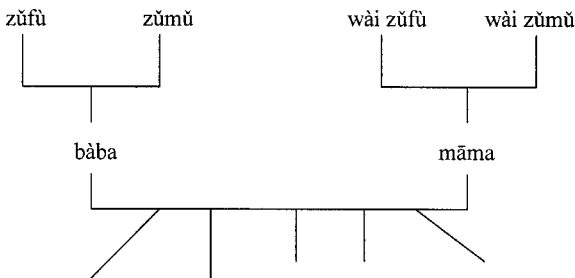
Classify and describe your family members.

Míngzì: _____

Niánjì: _____

Lǎoshī: _____

Family member	Nán	Nǚ	Suì	Shēngrì Yuè Hào	Guójí	Gōngzuò	Shàngxué	Niánjì



Appendix 4: Chart 11

Complete the following table after reading “Lili de Rìcháng Shēnghuó”

	Shíjiān (time)	Huódòng (activity)
早上	7:00 – 7:45	
		qù 上学
上午	8:00	
		shàngkè
中午	12:00 – 2:00	
下午	2:00 – 4:00	
		kèwài huódòng
		huìjiā
晚上	6:00 – 7:00	
	7:00 – 9:00	
夜里		shuāyá, xǐzǎo
	10:00	

Appendix 5: The Text

Please read the following passage and complete the worksheet attached.

我 de Rìcháng Shēnghuó

我 jiào Lili. 我 zài 中国上小学。 我上小学五 niánjī 。

Měi tiān 早上我 xiǎn qǐchuáng, ránhòu chuānyī 。 Shuāyá, xǐliǎn hòu chī zǎofàn 。 7:45 qù 上学。 我们 8:00 kāishǐ shàngkè 。 上午 8:00 dào 12:00 yǒu 四 jié kè 。

中午 12:00 dào 2:00, 我们 chī wǎnfàn, xiūxi 。

下午 2:00 dào 4:00 shàngkè, 4:00 dào 5:00 kèwài huódòng, ránhòu huíjiā 。

晚上 6:00 dào 7:00 chī wǎnfàn 。 Wǎnfàn hòu zuò jiǎtíng gōngkè 。 9:00 zhǔnbèi shuǐjiào 。 Shuǐjiào qián 我 shuāyá, xǐzǎo 。 Zuihòu 10:00 shuǐjiào 。

我 píngcháng bú kàn diànshì 。 Zhōumò kàn diànshì 。

měitiān:	everyday
jié:	measure word for kè
huíjiā:	go home
píngcháng:	usual days (i.e., weekdays)
zhōumò:	weekend