Effective Native and Non-Native Teacher Rotation to Benefit Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract:

It is generally assumed that native speaker teachers, compared with non-native speaker teachers, are more beneficial to foreign language learning. Hence most schools deem "native speaker in the target language" as a preferred and often required qualification when hiring foreign language teachers. This paper explores the West Point Chinese learners' perceptions of native and non-native Chinese teachers. The findings reveal that Chinese foreign language students at West Point feel that each type of teacher has its own unique merits. In general, native teachers have advantages at speaking, listening and writing, while non-native teachers' fortes are explaining grammar, and empathizing with students and providing them with emotional support. The results show that native language proficiency alone does not guarantee successful foreign language teaching. Effective learning of foreign languages engages cognitive (intellectual) as well as affective (psychological, emotional and cultural) dimensions. These findings have curricular and pedagogical implications for foreign language education in terms of Native/Non-Native teacher hiring, placement, teamwork, rotation and peer learning.

Introduction:

At the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, the Department of Foreign Languages has both native and non-native foreign language professors. Since the fall of 2010, the above authors were both assigned to teach the basic Chinese course and both enrolled in the Academy’s Master Teaching Program (MTP) under the auspices of the Center for Teaching Excellence. From these shared teaching and pedagogical experiences, the authors and other course instructors had many course discussions about the best way to introduce and explain new foreign language concepts. From the desire to improve their own teaching pedagogy, the authors
discussed the different points of view concerning native and non-native teachers and how the rotation of the two different types of teachers can benefit foreign language learning.

In general it is assumed that native foreign language teachers when compared to non-native foreign language teachers are more beneficial to foreign language learning. Hence many schools deem “native tongue in the target language” as a preferred and often required qualification when hiring foreign language teachers. Yet, many academic institutions also employ at least a small ratio of non-native speakers in their foreign language departments. While some of these positions may be the result of available resources, others were hired and subsequently retained for their effective teaching. As both of the authors continued teaching the basic and later the intermediate Chinese courses and observed and covered each other’s sections, they recognized and became interested in how native and non-native speakers employ different teaching pedagogy, explanations, and mnemonics based on their experience and background with the language. This led to this paper’s limited but focused study through the use of student feedback to explore the learner’s perceptions of native versus non-native speaker Chinese teachers. The findings not only made the authors better teachers, but let them see how implementing an effective rotation between native and non-native teachers could improve the academy’s students’ foreign language learning. For the purpose of this paper, native teachers are defined as professors who were born and grew up in a foreign country, speak another language other than English as their native tongue, and attended schooling in that country through at least their undergraduate education. Non-native teachers are defined as professors who primarily grew up in the United States, speak English as their primary language, and attended schooling in the United States through their undergraduate education. Under this definition, heritage speakers, unless a foreign language was their first language, are considered non-native speakers.
Methodology:

In order to determine if and how a rotation of native and non-native Chinese language teachers benefits the academy’s students’ foreign language learning, the authors first looked at what level of instruction they would assess and what things they wanted to look at in order to draw out quantitative and qualitative data from their students, the assessors. For this proposal, the authors looked at the basic, LC 203, and the intermediate, LC 361 Chinese courses in the fall of 2010 or the first semester of academic year 2011. For the students at the basic level, this was their first foreign language course at the academy and they only possessed their previous high school foreign language experiences which more than likely was not in the Chinese language. For the students at the intermediate level, almost all of them had taken Chinese the previous year at the academy unless they placed straight into this level. A large percentage of them had the experience of at least two different Chinese teachers of which one was a non-native speaker.

Two native civilian female Chinese speakers, one at the basic level and one at the intermediate level, participated along with one military male non-native Chinese speaker at both levels. The overall goal was to see if and how rotating the native and non-native teachers between each course’s lesson or lessons could improve students’ learning and what feedback the teachers would receive to improve their own teaching pedagogy. Some of the initial items discussed included: what do native or non-native professors teach better or how do they get new foreign language concepts across better to their students? There are many different examples of mental shortcuts, stories, mnemonics, or hints to help remember and comprehend a foreign language. By learning what is clear or unclear to their students concerning the same material, the teachers ended up gaining a better understanding and learned from each other thereby improving their teaching strategies.
In order to acquire the desired quantitative and qualitative data about their teaching and the rotation between them, the teachers employed student feedback learning assessments. They developed their own student feedback learning assessment sheets based off of the Academy’s Center for Teaching Excellence Learning Assessment Webpage (Center For Teaching Excellence at West Point. Website Learning Assessment Webpage). A copy of the Cadet Self-Assessment Form given after each lesson is appended to this paper.

At the beginning of the semester for the basic and intermediate Chinese courses, the teachers continued to teach their own section through the first three lessons and first major graded event in order to establish a baseline and to build rapport with their students. After this initial period, the teachers conducted their first class assessment. Then the native and the non-native teachers began their rotations. At the basic level, the teachers rotated every day through the different lessons. Through each lesson, the native and non-native teachers taught all aspects of each lesson. At the intermediate level, the teachers rotated only after each complete lesson was finished. The research was conducted in this manner due to each professor’s teaching schedule; otherwise it would have been standardized. In addition, one must note that while the basic Chinese course meets every day, the intermediate Chinese course meets every other day. After each lesson, the students filled out the teachers’ anonymous self-assessment form. The multiple self-assessment forms, the student teacher interactions and discussions, and the discussions between the native and non-native teachers produced the data analyzed for this classroom pedagogy research.

**Analysis:**

After collecting all of the various data for this research project, the results and trends were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Looking first at the basic and intermediate students’
opinion on whether or not rotating native and non-native speakers was beneficial to their foreign language learning, two items are important to point out. First as the data shows in figures one and two below, the majority of students believed that the native and non-native teacher rotation was beneficial. In the beginning in the basic course, more students answered that they believed it would not be or was not beneficial, but later on as the semester progressed the number of students reporting that the rotation was not beneficial lowered as the beneficial response gained in numbers. The intermediate course data responses also clearly showed that the students believed the rotation was positive, but the numbers of students reporting for both categories remained constant throughout the reporting period.

The second point about this data involves one’s biases and one’s previously established personal relationship with one’s teacher. For the basic course, the research project officially started after the first major graded event. But that event was a few weeks into the semester. By that time, many of the students in both of the sections polled mentioned that they really just wanted to stick with their original teacher and it did not matter whether the teacher was a native or a non-native speaker. It is similar to the research and what Joseph Lowman wrote about in his book, *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching*, that teachers and students do form an emotional bond or foster strong personal relationships to one another; and it these relationships that are very important towards students’ motivation and satisfaction (66-72). This is a possible explanation for the data trend in the first chart.

In the intermediate class, one can also see that a couple of the students never changed their opinion. While the responses were all anonymous, during the coding of the data it was evident that it was the same students’ writing for this question and their answers did not change. This is primarily due to that students’ stated preference. That person was not going to change his or her
made-up opinion, especially during the short research time period. These responses were adamant about wanting a native speaker and that he or she learns best from a native speaker even though the students also mentioned the merits of a non-native speaker as well in their responses.

It was also interesting to read the qualitative comments about the students’ opinions, as many of the comments, really emphasized how some students just wanted their original teacher with whom they had established their emotional bond. If one could run the research project again, it would be more beneficial to start very early in the semester so that a bond could be formed with all participating rotating teachers, and to have a control section where there was not a rotation but a substitution every month or so and then afterwards to see how the students felt about that rotation.

See Figure 1 below:

![LC 203 Basic Chinese: Opinion About The Rotation of Native and Non-Native Teachers](image-url)
To investigate why the majority of foreign language learners favor native and non-native teacher rotation, the authors’ questionnaire asks the students what foreign language skills they either preferred to be taught from a native or a non-native teacher or felt that type of teacher explained better. When the average person is asked is this type of question, many times one hears the answer, well the native teacher performs all of these skills better. But from the study’s research and qualitative comments one can see that this is clearly not the case. In order to show the data trends, the authors have graphically represented all of the students’ responses over the course of the research project from both the basic and the intermediate Chinese courses including the five main foreign language skill modalities in a life-saver chart format. Students were permitted to identify more than one modality in their responses.
LC 203 Basic Chinese: What are the language skills you prefer (explained better) from a native teacher or from a non-native teacher?

Figure 3: See above.

At the basic Chinese course level, one can see that as the students became more familiar with the Chinese language and had interacted with the instructors more, their feedback increased and they were able to better articulate which type of teacher, the native or the non-native, assisted them more with certain foreign language learning modalities. It is very challenging for a non-native speaker to become a fluent Chinese speaker and overcome the advantage that the native speaker has. This is clearly shown in the above figure 3. But if that modality was removed, one can see that the overall number of responses for both the native and the non-native speaker in all of the other modalities was very close. And besides two assessment periods, where the speaking modality was rated very high and there was a significant difference between the totals of all of
the foreign language modalities, the other three assessment periods showed only small
differences in the total number of responses recorded.

What explains some of the differences between the different foreign language learning
modalities in the different assessment periods? The answer partially lies in the focus of the
lesson. While every lesson practices each language modality, some lessons have certain
exercises that stress one modality over another. In addition, if the assessment period was right
after a graded event such as a speaking check, a listening quiz, or a writing exercise, this could
have influenced the students’ responses and how the teachers specifically prepared the students
for these graded events. Some of the differences are also associated with the teachers’ different
teaching styles, strategies, or techniques.

Depending upon a lesson’s clearest or muddiest point, the teacher does have the latitude to
spend extra time covering topics that need additional emphasis and will therefore reduce the
amount of time spent on easier language concepts. Some teachers stress character writing every
day and some only perform it on certain days, for teaching and practicing to write Chinese
characters consumes the most class time. In addition, the non-native speaker may employ
technology or other teaching materials to help compensate for his lack of perfect native Chinese.
For example, the non-native teacher may employ Chinese sound files or other short video clips
that reinforce the vocabulary and the lesson and permits the students to hear other native
speakers speaking the language. This helps diminish the complete reliance on the teacher for
listening and speaking and permits other accents and examples that the native speaker teacher
either does not yet know about or may feel is not needed. And yet some of the students have
identified with and enjoy these additional materials. Discovering, learning about, sharing, and
using other teachers’ successful teaching techniques that the students also identified with was
one of the most valuable results for this research project for overall it improved the teachers’ pedagogy; and because of the assessments and comments from the students, they also benefited and improved their overall foreign language learning.

**LC 361 Intermediate Chinese: What are the language skills you prefer (explained better) from a native teacher or from a non-native teacher?**

![Figure 4: See above.](image)

For the intermediate Chinese class, shown in figure 4 above, the data shows marked differences from the basic Chinese class. Here the native speaker is preferred in total responses throughout the research period. Again, students were permitted to identify more than one of the five main foreign language modalities in their responses. Similar to the basic Chinese course data shown above, the intermediate course also showed a much higher preferred response for the native teacher’s native speaking ability. In addition, since the intermediate course focuses more
on writing actual sentences to small paragraphs, performing translations, and making sentences with the studied grammar patterns, the writing modality is stressed at a much higher level than the basic course. Here the native speaker during each assessment period shows a higher preferred response rate. Unfortunately for non-native speakers, the majority are also non-native writers and since Chinese does not use an alphabet of 26 letters or so, Chinese speakers must know around 2000 different characters to be considered semi-literate and around 3000 characters to be considered literate where one would be able to read a Chinese newspaper. Being able to write 3000 characters from memory is even more of a daunting task that the non-native speaker must constantly practice for writing Chinese characters is the most perishable skill of all of the modalities. Here the native speaker having grown up in China and written these characters tens of thousands of times has all of them in their long term memory. Most non-native speakers who teach Chinese can remember how to write the 2000 basic characters, but it is the more difficult characters that if one does not practice them, one forgets them and loses that skill. This is similar to the native speaker who has moved to and lived in a foreign country for a decade or more, many times they cannot remember how to write the most difficult characters as well.

From some of the qualitative comments concerning writing Chinese characters, while both the native and the non-native teachers show the same way to write the character, what the character’s radical or root part of the character is and what it means, and what the character itself means, the native speaker can rapidly write this and other characters on the blackboard when creating sentences and can add other characters to this word to make new words. The non-native’s character writing ability may be relatively strong for he has prepared for the lesson at hand, but his writing speed is markedly slower and as he may desire to add in some additional character combinations for new words, he has to make sure that he knows how to write them all ahead of
time. This is why many times the native teacher will write all over the blackboard while the non-native speaker will use technology to his advantage and type the characters into a Chinese software program that will show the same sentence characters on the screen in front of the blackboard. Unfortunately, once one leaves the academic setting, unless the non-native speaker becomes a Chinese teacher, the vast majority of non-native students of Chinese will almost never write Chinese again and their writing skills rapidly deteriorate. In general, one just needs to be required to be able to write basic biographical information such as their name, address, country, gender, etc. This is primarily due to the proliferation of computers and the ease of Chinese computer input software. The old saying that once one knows how to write a Chinese character from memory, the person really knows that character and will almost always remember it, how to write it, and the meanings of its different components still holds true, and it is this advantage that helps keep the writing skill clearly in favor of the native speaker especially when one is teaching or focusing on writing sentences all the way through essays.

While the native speaker is clearly favored in speaking and writing, the non-native speaker still performs quite well in the grammar and reading modalities. From the qualitative comments, it is through the use of the same technology that the non-native speaker uses to be able to quickly construct and show Chinese sentences on the screen, that benefit him in these aspects as well. While both the native and the non-native teachers use the same text, teach the same grammar structures, and read the same text or sample sentences, the non-native speaker seemed to provide more examples per grammar pattern, showed them on the screen, had the students read them out loud to practice their literacy, and explained the points again in these difference circumstances. Most Chinese texts will introduce a grammar pattern and then only show one to two examples for that pattern. By providing 8-10 examples per pattern, having the students see them and
practice them, and by providing the students with the teacher’s grammar slides at the end of the text’s lesson, the students could use these teaching materials to prepare for lesson quizzes and their sentence structure and translation homework. This is another example of a different teaching style and as the semester progressed and the two teachers met for class preparation discussions, the grammar slides were shared by all. If this study could be replicated and expanded in the future, it would be interesting to see the responses of the next higher level of Chinese classes, the high intermediate to advanced levels. The assumption is that trends shown in figure four above would continue. As only one non-native and two native teachers participated in this study, it would also be beneficial to expand the research to include more non-native speakers at different skill levels to see how that would influence the students’ responses and to see what additional teaching pedagogy techniques could be learned and shared.

The above Figures 3-4 illustrate diachronically the learners’ evaluation of the proficiency of native versus non-native teachers in five foreign language modalities. Figures 5-6 below approach the same data from a synchronic perspective by looking at the learners’ accumulative total responses in the five major language skills. Not surprisingly in both basic and intermediate Chinese, students strongly favor native teachers over non-native teachers in the area of speaking (LC203: NT=47 vs. NnT=14; LC361: NT=18 vs. NnT=3). They also give native teachers an advantage over non-native teachers in listening (LC203: NT=19 vs. NnT=13; LC361: NT=8 vs. NnT=5), but the difference is noticeably less than in speaking. On the other hand, students consistently rate non-native teachers as better grammar explainers than native teachers (LC203: NT=19 vs. NnT=27; LC361: NT=4 vs. NnT=13). They also prefer non-native teachers to native teachers in reading (LC203: NT=6 vs. NnT=12; LC361: NT=4 vs. NnT=6), but the margin is less significant than in grammar. The greatest disparity between LC203 basic Chinese and LC361
intermediate Chinese lies in writing. While in LC203 students rate native and non-native teachers almost equally (NT=15 vs. NnT=16), in LC361 students unanimously rate native teachers higher than non-native teachers (NT=16 vs. NnT=1). If one adds up those five language skill modalities, native teachers have a small edge over non-native teachers in LC203 (NT=106 vs. NnT=82), but the difference is markedly enhanced in LC361 (NT=50 vs. NnT=28). To summarize those statistics, overall students feel that native teachers benefit them more in speaking, listening and writing, while non-native teachers explain grammar and reading better. But their approval of non-native teachers declines as the students reach the intermediate level and the reasons for this were analyzed above.

**LC203: What are the skills you prefer from a native teacher or from a non-native teacher**

![Bar chart](image)

*Figure 5: see above*
LC361: What are the skills you prefer from a native teacher or from a non-native teacher

![Bar chart comparing skills of native and non-native teachers](chart.png)

Figure 6: see above.

The above Figures 3-6 compare native and non-native teachers in five specific language skills. But as Joseph Lowman points out, effective college teaching combines two dimensions: intellectual excitement and interpersonal rapport (20-37). While those graphs address the first dimension nicely, they totally leave out the second, which is an integral part of excellent teaching. The authors noticed that the student questionnaires repeatedly refer to the affective aspects of foreign language learning. For example, in LC203, while some students show unwavering preference for native teachers, a significant amount of students also speak out why they think that non-native teachers teach them better:

1. “It is beneficial that native teachers instruct the higher levels, while the non-native teachers deal with the beginners to develop good habits; also it breaks a mental barrier that even non-Chinese people can learn the language.”
2. “I guess non-native speakers can explain better with some parts of different language skills since they were in the same situation as we are right now, so they know better how to teach us more efficiently.”
3. “Better to learn everything from a non-native speaker because he understands how hard it is and what needs to be done to help you.”
4. “Regarding learning a foreign language, I feel that a non-native would be better because that means he also had to take the language and learn how to tell and show us how he learned the language.”
5. “Non-native speaker has learned the foreign language experience so he has useful hints and suggestions.”
6. “Non-native class was easier.”
7. “The grammar and the writing I learn better from a non-native speaker because they have an easier time relating it to English.”
8. “Sometimes it is easier to learn from a non-native because of the way they explain things, it sometimes just clicks in my head easier.”
9. “I like how a non-native explains the ‘why’ much better.”
10. “Non-native speakers will hit some things that the native speakers take for granted.”
11. “Non-native explains things on non-native terms.”
12. “Non-native speaks slower which is good.”
13. “I like the non-native teachers better because they grade realistically.”
14. “I feel the non-native is more understanding when it comes to listening. They compensate while natives talk too fast.”
15. “Non-native speakers explain language points, especially grammar, better because they share different ways to remember stuff as opposed to native speakers who don't seem to understand why you can’t understand what they’re saying.”

The above-quoted comments explain various reasons why non-native teachers attract beginning learners, including: providing a learner’s model; emphasizing with the learners and easing learning anxiety/stress; providing useful study tips and hints and relating foreign language points to the learners’ native tongue; and sensitivity to the learners’ identities, needs and targets. This indicates that while native teachers have an absolute advantage over non-native teachers in oral skills, non-native teachers compensate those shortcomings with their cultural and emotional affinity with foreign language learners, especially at the entry level. Since Chinese is considered a highly difficult language for English speakers and may seem intimidating to many first-timers, the bridging effect of non-native teachers to “break mental barriers” and facilitate cross-lingual and cross-cultural communication can’t be undervalued. In this sense, teaming and rotating native and non-native teachers will provide foreign language students a better all round learning experience.
**Conclusion and Recommendations:**

The present research questions the common assumption that native teachers have inherited and decisive advantages over non-native teachers. From the learners’ point of view, native language proficiency alone does not guarantee successful foreign language teaching. Effective learning of foreign languages engages cognitive (intellectual) as well as affective (psychological, emotional and cultural) dimensions. Native and non-native teachers both have relative strengths and weaknesses along the range of dimensions identified in this study. A well informed and planned placement of these two types of faculty will provide students with broad exposure to various aspects of foreign language acquisition.

For the two teachers conducting this teaching pedagogy research, the experiment and experience allowed them an opportunity to work together as a team, learn different teaching techniques and strategies from the other, and improve their teaching pedagogy. As one of the teachers is the course director for the basic course, the research experiment has also improved the overall basic Chinese course. Non-native instructors are a valuable addition to the classroom in their own right and as military officers also serve in other functions such as role models and career mentors to cadets and mediators between military and civilian culture. Most importantly, the authors’ experiment benefitted the students’ foreign language learning. In future iterations of particularly the Chinese basic course, as the intermediate course does not always have a non-native Chinese instructor to teach it, the course director will use the lessons learned to share with the other teachers and as resources permit, to rotate the native and non-native teachers from lesson to lesson or from semester to semester so that the students get the most benefit out of the class. Meanwhile, the course director will encourage the six native and non-native teachers in basic Chinese to visit each other’s classes, discuss “what works and what does not,” and share
teaching resources and tips. Through peer assessment and learning, one party is able to draw on
the other party’s strong suits and make an overall stronger teaching team.

While this research was an excellent beginning to improving the teachers’ pedagogy and
expanding upon the literature under the scholarship of teaching, the authors clearly recognize
that the sample size and number of participating native and non-native teachers was too small to
really extrapolate and apply to many other situations. In addition, all of West Point’s processes,
from language selection, to class times, to attendance policies are pretty unique to a military
academy. Much of the teachers’ data was qualitative in nature. But if the teachers have the time
and the opportunity in the future, they would like to continue to run this research experiment to
include larger samples, over a period of years, with more native and non-native teachers, and to
really institute more scientific controls including a control section, all the while trying to
improve the teachers’ pedagogy and the course’s content and structure within the limits
permitted for the course. If something like this could be instituted on a larger scale, a greater
number of teachers would be able to benefit from it, first possibly other teachers from other
language sections in the Department of Foreign Languages at West Point and then later, other
teachers from other academic undergraduate institutions could try and replicate the research
experiment to see if the results could be quantitatively measured and if certain teaching
techniques and teacher roles could be further identified and used for the benefit of all students
learning a foreign language. If these types of recommendations could be realized, it would
permit students to learn a foreign language faster and more effectively.
Appendix: Cadet Self-Assessment Form Given After Each Lesson
Class Assessments LC 203 or LC 361

Please provide a one or two sentence response to each of the following questions:

1. For you, what was the easiest part(s) of this lesson (what specific part(s) of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar)?

2. What was the most useful or meaningful thing(s) you learned from this lesson (what specific part(s) of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar)?

3. What did you find most difficult about this lesson (what specific part(s) of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar)?

4. What part of the lesson is still the least clear to you (what specific part(s) of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar)?

5. What is your opinion about the rotation of teachers between the native and non-native teachers? Is this beneficial?

6. What are the language skills (what specific part(s) of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar) that you prefer, or learn better from a native or non-native speaker? Are there language points covered or explained better or differently?
Works Cited

http://www.dean.usma.edu/cte/learningassessment.cfm.