

INTERVIEW

Language takes on Chinese flavour

Putonghua is set to rival English as the foreign language to learn, language centre director tells Raymond Zhou

If you walk into a large bookstore in any major mainland city, you'll be amazed by the number and variety of titles that teach English to Chinese-speakers. Some are multi-volume tomes that may take years to digest, while others proclaim to impart this language skill in a pain-free manner, like the books that assure students they'll be able to write essays in English in 42 days.

While some of these claims are dubious, to say the least, one thing that cannot be doubted is that, on the mainland nowadays, teaching English is big business.

In fact, it is "a large industry due to the number of non-native speakers involved", says Weiping Wu, director of New Asia-Yale-in-China Chinese Language Center of The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Learners of English are generally referred to as students of ESL, or English as a Second Language. A group of language learners that grows every year and can be found in countries across the globe, they are avidly pursued by operators in the language market.

According to a British Council survey, the worldwide English-speaking population is over 1 billion, and that includes both native and non-native speakers.

On the mainland alone, all of its urban populations can be categorized as ESL learners to some degree, and the numbers are growing at an exponential rate due to the spread of ESL programmes in schools in the countryside.

But a parallel industry of CSL, or Chinese as a Second Language, learning is also emerging, Wu says. "CSL will quickly become as large an industry (as ESL) due to the enormous number of native speakers

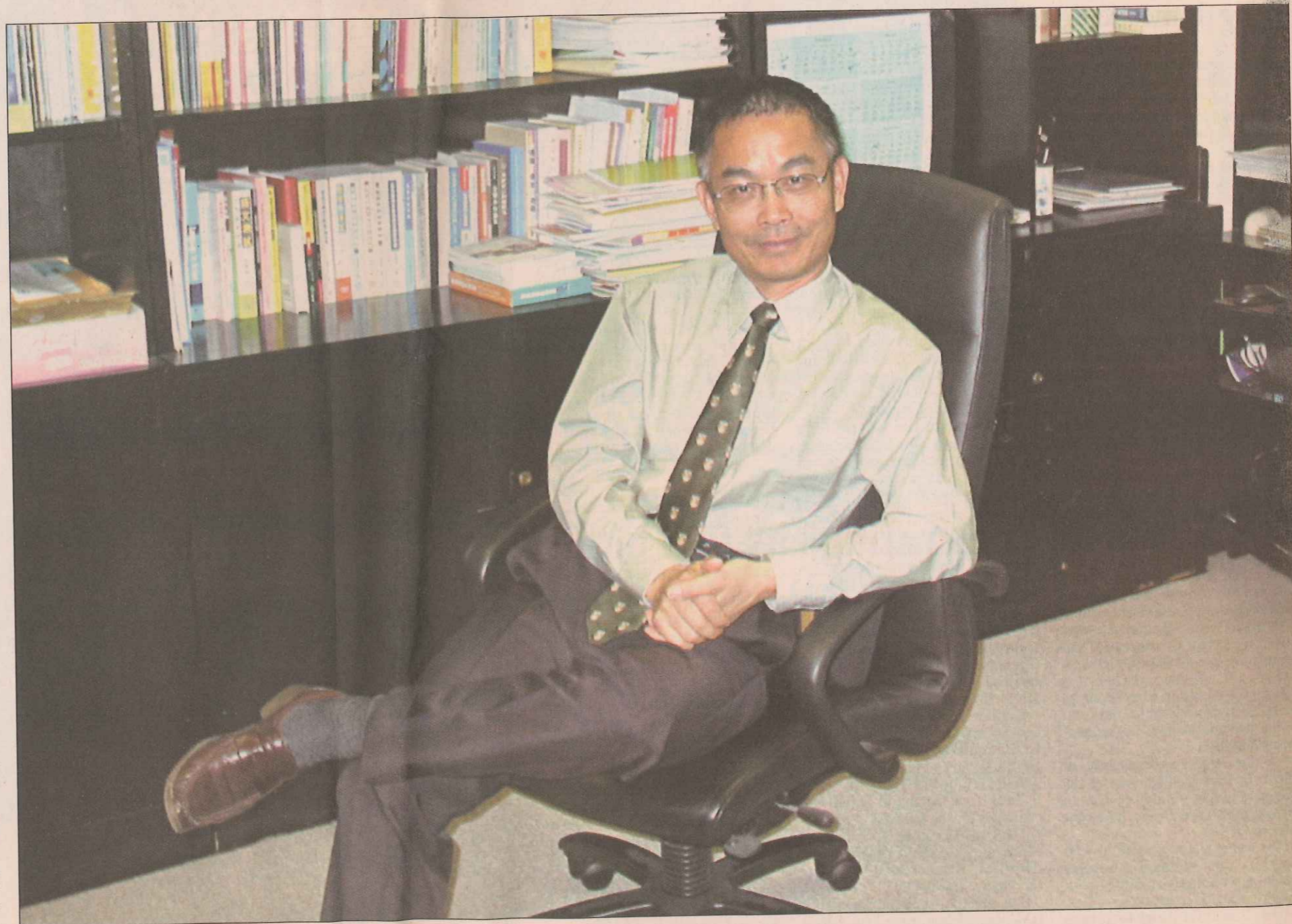
by most estimates.

"Now if we imagine the same scenario happening with the Chinese language, which has more than 1 billion native speakers," says Wu, "one can see what the future for CSL might be like. With the advent of the so-called 'Chinese Century' and the Beijing Olympics in 2008, it is most likely that this 'robust little fellow' is going to grow up much faster than most people expect."

There are many signs that this is already happening. In recent years, waves of people have been flooding into the mainland to get "up close and personal" with the language, and completely immersing themselves in a Putonghua-speaking environment. Almost every university in Beijing has a CSL programme for foreign students, and Jinan University in Guangzhou has more overseas students this year than it has local students.

The Chinese Language Center that Wu helms may be small by comparison, but it is the largest in Hong Kong, with as many as 800 students from all over the world enrolling every year for the primary purpose of language learning. By 2003, close to 10,000 foreign students had completed study at the centre and the alumni includes top government officials in HKSAR, key players in diplomatic circles and presidents of chambers of commerce.

In other countries, CSL is popping up on many curricula. Examples of Chinese language learning gaining popularity overseas abound. In the US, some high schools used to be considered "courageous" for offering CSL, but now schools like Potomac Elementary in Rockville, Maryland, have a Chinese immersion programme even at kindergarten level.



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But a parallel industry of CSL, or Chinese as a Second Language, learning is also emerging, Wu says. "CSL will quickly become as large an industry (as ESL) due to the enormous number of native speakers and the increasing interest in the language from non-Chinese people around the world. After all, nobody can brush aside a language if one out of every five people in the world uses it in their daily life," he says.

Wu refers to ESL as a "giant" that has been around for more than half a century and CSL as a "toddler" compared to its grown-up cousin. The number of non-native speakers of English, thanks to the ESL industry, has caught up and surpassed the number of native speakers, which is around 375 million

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By 2006, Chinese will be added to the roster of Advanced Placement for all high school students entering college in the US, says Wu.

Here in Hong Kong, where both English and Chinese are official languages, it is ideal for a speaker of one language to dip his foot in the waters of the other. However, there are complications as well. Wu found out when he first arrived and discovered that in Hong Kong, "Chinese" actually means Cantonese, whereas the Chinese language that CSL refers to is Putonghua.

Wu states that there has been a major shift in the focus of ESL and CSL, from "knowledge" to "ability".

A student, says Wu, absorbs different kinds of knowledge from day one of his schooling. University courses are all about knowledge, he says.

"A language learner, be it in ESL or CSL, used to learn the sound (phonology), meaning (semantics and pragmatics) and rules (grammar) of the language which is 'knowledge', during most of his time at the school."

"Ability", on the other hand, is the "application of that knowledge in real life," says Wu. Linguists tend to regard "knowledge" as linguistic



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WEIPING WU

Director of New Asia-Yale-in-China Chinese Language Center at CUHK

competence and "ability" as being performance. Although many educators have come to realize that a language test should also measure performance rather than just take stock of a student's knowledge of a language, the programme that he leads at CUHK is "perhaps the only one in Hong Kong that issues a certificate with descriptions of the learner's ability to use the language in life, be it Putonghua or Cantonese," says Wu.

This distinction is important because some students achieve good results because of their absorption of the fundamentals of the language, but are deficient in its application. Wu states that some students are able

to memorize thousands of words of a language, and all of its grammatical rules, but are at a loss when it comes to actually speaking or writing in this language.

Fortunately, he says, language teaching, unlike fashion trends, which can be cyclical, has a tendency to evolve and develop. Teachers nowadays motivate students in a student-centred learning environment, rather than just impart knowledge or analyze the complexities of it.

"It is no longer a teacher-dominated classroom. Student attention is drawn to not only what a word means, but how, when and where it should be used."

"A shift in focus in language learning inevitably leads to changes in testing", says Wu, who has also been serving as a testing specialist for many projects in the US and Hong Kong. He believes that such changes are part of a language having a "life of its own".

His language tests are designed for various purposes, such as college entrance examinations or for promotion or graduation in particular courses.

TOEFL, or Test of English as a Foreign Language, which has been the leading English language proficiency test for the past 40 years, attracts 800,000 individuals worldwide each year. Textbooks and related products make it an industry worth billions of US dollars a year.

In the CSL market, Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) and the Putonghua Shuiping Ceshi (PSC) are growing in popularity.

However, Wu warns, no matter how well a test is designed or publicized, once it comes into widespread use, it can take on "a life of its own" or even become a "black hole" that teachers and students blindly follow.

"If everyone is teaching and learning in order to pass the test, the essentials in language learning

are either pushed aside or simply forgotten."

Horror stories abound of Chinese students who, armed with perfect TOEFL scores, can still barely comprehend what is being taught or discussed in a typical American college classroom. Likewise, a high score in HSK or PSC does not necessarily prove that the CSL learner will be able to communicate well in Putonghua.

With the rise of certain tests that have begun to dictate the scope of ESL and CSL learning, is there a way to avoid the danger of widely used tests that are potentially ineffective?

It seems highly unlikely, says Wu, but says that while it may be difficult to change the strong influence the testing system has, problems with

competency can be resolved by creating better tests. Wu also believes that there is a tendency for people to blame the tests without realizing that a test is nothing if not supported by the system.

Any significant changes to the testing methods, he adds, must be accompanied by a suitable alternative that will be able to fill the void that any changes create.

As with any industry, the language learning market has its ups and downs. Right now, the relatively young upstart CSL is on the rise, while there appears to be no end in sight for ESL. Schools and learning programmes that are going with the trend stand to profit from it.

And educators like Wu seem to be happy to see both teachers and learners reap the benefits.

BIO-BOX

Weiping Wu is director of the New Asia-Yale-in-China Chinese Language Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

A testing specialist and researcher, Wu oversees the teaching department and its 50-member staff.

Wu's professional experience includes teaching at various universities on the mainland and in the US and Hong Kong, where he conducts teacher training workshops and academic research in cross-cultural communication.