Defining Curriculum Objectives in Terms of Learner Performance: Justifications and Challenges[1]

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Abstract: Chinese language teaching is experiencing an unprecedented surge both at home and abroad, and has achieved notable successes in material development, instruction, and testing. Curriculum objectives, as well as its study and specification, however, seem to be lagging behind, though objectives are generally considered as one of the essential components of curriculum, which set standards of evaluation, and also dictate the implementation of instruction. So far, curriculum objectives have yet to receive sufficient attention in the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign/second language. An informal survey of 44 Chinese language programs in leading institutions in China and the U.S. conducted recently has found that the overwhelming majority has no proper definition of learning objectives. This paper, based on the survey results and the author' personal observations, compares the different practices of various programs and analyzes their strengths and weaknesses. It presents the justifications for defining objectives in terms of learner performance in Chinese language teaching, testing, and articulation, after a brief review of the relevant theory of curriculum development. The paper also discusses some practical issues and challenges in this attempt. It argues that if we want to bring teaching Chinese as a foreign/second language (TCFL/TCSL) to the next level, it is high time that we raise our awareness of this fundamental issue and have discussions in depth and on a broader scale.

Key words: curriculum objectives, performance, define, instruction, testing

提要：作为一个蒸蒸日上的新学科，对外汉语在教材、教学和测试等方面，都取得了显著的成就。然而，作为统领整个课程（非狭义的某一门课）、影响教学全过程的教学目标，其研究和设定，似乎却落后于在其他方面。笔者近年来在中美两国几十所大学的 44 个对外汉语教学单位(programs)作了一次非正式的调查，发现不少单位的教学大纲，对各年级不同课程的教学目标普遍确乏恰当、明确的描述。根据这次调查的结果和个人的观察，本文比较分析了各单位目前实行的不同做法及其利弊，并从有关教学目标的课程理论入手，简述了制定具体、明确的，特别是以学生的实际语言能力来描述的教学目标的重要性和必要性，然后对课程教学目标设定的一些具体做法和需要解决的问题，进行了初步的讨论。尽管目前我们在理论上对教学目标的设定尚缺乏充分的认识，在实际操作中还会遇到各种各样的困难，但是笔者相

[1] I am very grateful to my colleagues and friends in these programs who generously share with me the information about their programs' curricula, and the relevant course objectives. Without their help, it is impossible to finish this study. At the request of most interviewees, their institutions will remain anonymous. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

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信，只要我们在思想上予以高度的重视，加大这方面研究的力度，并进行广泛深入的探讨，不拘泥于固有的模式，根据汉语教学的特点，大胆创新，很可能会闯出一条新路，使对外汉语教学更上层楼，把外语教学的课程理论研究推向新的水平。

关键词：课程、教学目标、表现、 设定、教学、 测试

1. Introduction

Curriculum objectives have received little attention in the field of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign/Second Language. A perusal of the major treatises on TCFL/TCSL shows that there is hardly any specific discussion about specifying curriculum objectives in terms of learner performance. An informal survey of the Chinese language programs in 44 leading institutions in China and the U.S. conducted recently has found that the overwhelming majority had no proper definition of learner objectives. While some programs stated objectives in their Chinese language course syllabi in terms of how many characters, words, and sentence patterns students should master, instead of what students should be able to do with these linguistic elements in actual communication; others identified their objectives from the teacher's perspective, namely, instructional activities or teachers' effort rather than the intended learning outcomes; still others chose a certain proficiency level outright from some official tests such as the *HSK* or the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, without considering the differences between the two, and whether they actually provide reliable and valid proficiency tests by the end of each course.

Based on the above-mentioned survey and observations, this paper discusses some fundamental questions regarding curriculum objectives, providing a theoretical background of specifying objectives in terms of learner performance. It then analyzes the negative consequences and possible causes of the current problems in stating instructional objectives. The paper presents the justifications for defining objectives in learner performance in Chinese language programs, across the spectrum of teaching, testing, and articulation between instructional levels (including high school to college). It argues that if we want to bring teaching TCFL/TCSL to the next level, it is high time that we raise our awareness of this fundamental issue and have discussions in depth and on a broader scale.

2. Chinese Language Course Objectives: An Informal Survey

2.1. The survey results

The survey was conducted between late 2004 to early 2007, primarily through informal interviews, and partially substantiated by relevant syllabi ob-

tained from the interviewees or the Internet. The interviewees were asked to provide information about their Chinese language course curricula, particularly the specific instructional objectives of each course, if there are any. There are altogether 44 Chinese language programs in some major colleges and universities in China (12), and the United States (32), a total of 455 courses at different levels[2]. The survey may not necessarily cover the entire curriculum of each program; however, it gives a general picture of the course objectives of these programs. The following table is the summary of the survey results:

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Table 1
Types of Objectives of Surveyed Chinese Language Courses (programs)

Types of Objectives expressed in terms of	Courses (12 programs) in China	Courses (32 programs) in the U.S.	Total (44 programs) courses
1. Textbooks	62	47	109
2. Linguistic items	7	6	13

[2] As most programs in China offer courses in Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing for each level, there are substantially more courses in these programs comparing with their American counterparts. In addition, some courses in the same program have different descriptions of objective, thus the total number of programs is not listed in the table to avoid possible multiple counts.

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3. Official standards	17	12	29
4. Teachers' effort/actions	78	26	104
5. A mixture of 2, 3 or 4	113	39	152
6. Learning outcomes of a specific lesson		3	3
7. learner performance (yet unclear or inconsistent)		48	48
Total courses	277	178	455

2.2. The various types of course objectives – a closer look

2.2.1. Textbooks or teaching materials as objectives

This practice is at one extreme of all the surveyed programs in that there is no explicit statement concerning objectives whatsoever, or even no written syllabus at all. The following remark of a program director best reveals, perhaps, the mindset of these practitioners. "Why do we need that? We have textbooks, and all we need to care is that students can master everything we have taught in the textbooks." It seems to them that since the textbooks have presented all the linguistic items and communicative functions sequentially, as long as teachers have finished the teaching materials from cover to cover, students should have a good command of all the requisite knowledge and skills accordingly. In some programs, objectives are not a common feature in all the course syllabi. While certain course syllabi do not have any objectives, some contain vague statements of one kind or another, similar to goals at best. There is, basically, no consistent practice at all, even in the same program.

2.2.2. Linguistic items to be taught as objectives

This is a traditional practice found rather commonly in the past twenty or thirty years but still lingering in the field of Chinese language teaching. The following are some typical examples,

- This course will develop speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. In the first semester, pronunciation and some basic grammar will be taught. There will also be an introduction to the Chinese writing system. By the end of the first semester, approximately 200 Chinese characters will have been introduced. By the end of the second semester, most of the basic grammar will have been introduced, as well as another 250 Chinese characters.

- To learn 1,500 words approximately and further understand the knowledge of grammar and master about 150 commonly used sentence patterns…[4]
- Through the reading course in a semester, students will master approximately 1,000 words, and learn about 60 linguistic items…[5]

2.2.3. Official standards or testing guidelines as objectives

It remains a popular trend to use some sort of official standards or testing guidelines such as the *HSK* (汉语水平考试) or the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines as course objectives although it is not as popular now as it was a dozen years ago.

- To enable students to reach Level 6 of the *HSK* (*Hànyǔ shuǐpíng kǎoshì*) – the official Chinese Proficiency Test in China.
- By the end of the course, we expect our students to move from the novice to the intermediate level in both oral and written communicative proficiency, a standard set by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).
- The teaching and learning goals are based on the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Proficiency Guidelines… The instructional goals of the XX Modern Chinese Language Program are summarized in the table below:

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
1st year Chinese	Intermediate High	Intermediate Mid	Intermediate Mid	Intermediate Low
1st year Heritage	Intermediate High	Intermediate High	Intermediate Mid	Intermediate Low
2nd year Chinese	Advanced	Intermediate High	Intermediate High	Intermediate Mid
3rd year Chinese	Advanced High	Advanced	Advanced	Intermediate High
4th year Chinese	Advanced High	Advanced High	Advanced High	Advanced
5th year Chinese	Superior	Superior	Advanced High	Advanced High

[4] The Chinese original–掌握词汇 1500 个左右，进一步深化语法知识，掌握常用句式 150 个左右.....

[5] The Chinese original – 通过一个学期的阅读，使学生掌握 1000 个左右的新词语，同时学习 60 个左右的语言知识点.....

- Through training to meet the needs of students in basic everyday life, social communication, and study in general, including: clothing, food, lodging, travel, introducing oneself and one's family, personal hobbies, leisure recreation, travel, sight-seeing, social life and class discussion, etc. (Students) can comprehend basically audio materials that contain no crucial unknown grammatical structures, new words not exceeding 2-3%, and with familiar topics, reaching the *HSK* Levels 5-6 in general.[6]

2.2.4. Teachers' effort or actions as objectives

It is interesting to notice that some programs have tried to specify their curriculum objectives in performance terms. The *agent* of these objectives, unfortunately, is not the student but the teacher. In other words, these objectives focus on the ***input*** rather than the ***output***, that is, not what the students will be able to do after the course but what the teachers should do or plan to do during the course instead. In some cases, the agent or subject of the sentences shifts elusively, from the teacher's perspective for one moment and then to the learner's for another, or vice versa (the underlined parts below).

- To develop students' interest in studying and using Chinese, and impel them to use Chinese to engage in simple communication. First of all, requiring students to have correct pronunciation and tones. Secondly, requiring students to know when to say what to whom, how to say it, and be able to complete a simple transaction in communication, with rudimentary understanding of the context and cultural characteristics in the process of communication.[7]
- The emphasis is on training students' ability to read and write, enabling students to express themselves accurately, fluently, and appropriately.[8]
- To develop and improve students' ability to read and literary Chinese (*shūmiànyǔ*). Starting from the training of reading strategies, and by reading extensively materials in literary Chinese, to provide students with focused, systematic, and specific training in words and phrases, sentences, paragraphs and dis-

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[6] The Chinese original – 通过训练满足学生基本日常生活、社交及一般学习的需要，其中包括衣、食、住、行，介绍个人情况、家庭情况、个人爱好、业余文化生活、参观、游览、社交和课堂讨论等方面的内容。能够基本听懂无关键性新语法点、生词不超过 2%~3%、话题熟悉的语音材料。基本达到 *HSK* 5-6 级标准。

[7] The Chinese original – 培养学生学习和使用汉语的兴趣，促使学生能运用汉语进行简单的交际。首先要求学生掌握正确的语音、声调。其次要求学生掌握在什么场合对谁说什么，怎么说，能够完成一个简单的交际过程，并简单了解交际过程中的语境与文化特点。

[8] The Chinese original – 着重训练学生的读和写的能力，使学生能准确、流畅、得体地表达自己的思想。

course, so as to enable students to have the ability to analogize. To enable students to read and comprehend essays of popular science and news reports, and to have the ability to skip reading obstacles, obtain the needed information, and understand the gist of the content. Through extensive reading, they should also be able to learn a certain number of new words accordingly. The reading speed should reach 150 words per minute, and with a 90% correct of comprehension when reading texts that contain limited unfamiliar words.[9]

- (WHO?) Attain skills that will enable the students to speak basic Chinese and to read, write and present short narratives.

2.2.5. A mixture of linguistic items, official standards, or teachers' effort as objectives

The survey has found that some programs in China and the U.S. shared a practice, that is, to specify course objectives by combining linguistic items, teachers' effort, and the official standards/testing guidelines. The words in upper case are added by the author.

- Through this period of grammar instruction and comprehensive training in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, to enable students to have better command of basic Chinese grammar, and learn some new linguistic items, communicative skills and relevant cultural knowledge. (STUDENTS) Can rather skillfully use the corresponding linguistic knowledge (grammars and vocabulary) to express themselves both in speaking and writing in paragraphs, and be able to use the language with considerable accuracy and appropriateness. After study for one academic year, (STUDENTS) are required to reach the 3rd level of Intermediate Chinese (developed by the Department of the Chinese Proficiency Test, National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, the equivalent of the Intermediate Level in *HSK*.)[10]

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[9] The Chinese original – 培养和提高学生阅读汉语书面语的能力。从阅读技能训练入手，通过阅读大量汉语书面材料，在字词、句子、段落和篇章诸方面对学生进行集中的、系统的、有针对性的训练，以使他们获得能够举一反三的阅读能力。能够读懂一般性的科普文章和新闻报道文章，有相当的跳跃障碍、查询所需信息、了解内容梗概的能力。并能通过大量的阅读，自然地吸收一定数量的新词。阅读限定生词的课文，速度达到 150 字/分以上，理解准确率达到 90%。

[10] The Chinese original – 通过此阶段的汉语知识讲授以及对学生进行听说读写综合训练，使学生进一步掌握汉语基础语法知识，并学习一些新的语言要素、言语技能和相关的文化知识。能够较熟练地运用相应的语言知识（语法、词汇）进行口头、书面成段表达，做到语言运用比较准确、得体。通过一学年的学习，要求达到汉语水平等级标准三级标准（由国家对外汉语教学领导小组水平考试部制定，对应 HSK 中等）。

• Course objectives are for students to obtain Intermediate-Mid to Intermediate High as per the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines. By the time they attain this level, learners will be able to conduct simple, practical conversations with Chinese speakers on a variety of everyday topics. They will also be able to read simple passages printed in traditional or simplified Chinese characters at about the 500-character level.

2.2.6. The expected learning outcomes of each individual lesson as objectives

This is, at least, a nice trial to specify the learning outcomes of each individual lesson, a breakaway from the very first type in which textbooks determine the learning objectives. The questions are 1) whether students can all the tasks, and how well they can perform, after studying a particular lesson, and 2) whether students are able to use comprehensively various knowledge and skills learned from different lessons to engage in more sophisticated communication in the interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive modes. Here are two examples:

Communicative Objectives (of Unit Ten – Weather)

♦ *By the end of this unit, you will be able to use Chinese to:*
   1) Talk about the weather and weather forecasts: hot, warm, cool, cold; high and low temperatures; dry vs. humid air; clear vs. cloudy skies; thunder, lightning, rain, fog, snow, typhoons, etc.
   2) Discuss climate: Beijing, Taipei, your hometown.
   3) Talk about the four seasons.
   4) Make comparisons and contrasts: "San Francisco is colder than Taipei, but not as cold as Beijing," etc.

♦ After studying this chapter, students should:
   1) Have a good command of the meaning and usage of these sentence patterns and terms: "zhàozhe" (according to; in accordance with), "zuòwéi" (be used as; be regarded as), "yóu...zǔchéng" (be made of; consist of), "bǎifēnzhī" (X percent), "A gēn B yǒu guānxi" (A is related to B; A has something to do with B), "háishi" (still), "yàoshì…nǎme" (if…then).
   2) Be familiar with the meaning and usage of the vocabulary introduced in the text and the reading.
   3) Understand the meaning and use of parts of a Chinese character.
   4) Understand the importance of writing Chinese characters correctly.

2.2.7. Inconsistent description of learner performance as objectives

The objectives below probably seem to be the closest to the model suggested

by curriculum theory in general. However, in addition to not being specific enough, the biggest disappointment is that these objectives are not found consistently course after course both in progression in linguistic skills and communicative functions. Sometimes, there are only one or two courses in a program that contains such objectives in their course syllabi. In other cases, the same objectives recur in the next sequenced course usually offered in the following semester. Although these objectives are defined in terms of learner performance, they are mostly individual teachers' personal endeavor. In other words, their programs do not have a systematic, coherent specification of curriculum objectives defined in learner performance; all they have are inconsistent objectives for individual courses only.

- **Objectives of 3rd Year Chinese**

(Note: courses sequenced before this one in the same program do not have objectives specified in this format, or even any mention of objectives at all.)

Upon successful completion of this course, students are expected to be able to:

1) understand most face-to-face conversations and discussions within the limit of students' linguistic and cultural knowledge.
2) initiate, sustain, and close a conversation on familiar topics and in normal social interactions.
3) read level-appropriate texts and comprehend the main ideas and some supporting details.
4) write coherent, short essays (including narrative, descriptive, and expository) with no major patterns of grammatical errors.

- C101 Elementary Chinese I Objectives:
  1) Read and write with the Pinyin system.
  2) Read and write 240 Chinese characters and related compounds.
  3) Carry out simple conversations on everyday topics.
  4) Read a simple story.

- C102 Elementary Chinese II Objectives:
  1) Add anther 240 Chinese characters and related compounds into existing repertoire.
  2) Carry out simple conversations on everyday topics.
  3) Read a simple story.
  4) Write out what you can say in Chinese.

- C201 Second-Year Chinese I Objectives:
  1) Carry out a simple face-to-face conversation with ease.
  2) Narrate a simple story or describe a familiar event.

- C202 Second-Year Chinese II Objectives: (same as C201 above)
  1) Carry out a simple face-to-face conversation with ease.
  2) Narrate a simple story or describe a familiar event.

2.3. The negative consequences

A curriculum without objectives is incomplete, and curriculum objectives stated other rather than in learner performance are inadequate. Thus the negative consequences are self-evident. First of all, when objectives are listed as teacher's actions or intents, we will have no clue as to what students can do with the target language despite all the wonderful things teachers may have done in class. After all, students are the ones who are supposed to learn, and their success in learning is ultimately measured by their performance. Secondly, the idea of using linguistic items as instructional objectives has long been considered antiquated. As Valette (1980:157) pointed out, "Language learning … is not the sum of myriad parts: it is not by learning 1000 grammar rules, 1000 verb forms, and 3000 items of vocabulary, for instance, that one can suddenly read, speak, or understand the language." I have heard about a dozen times the question "what grammar do you teach in the 3rd year?" among Chinese language teachers on different occasions. This reveals, to a certain extent, that the focus of instruction beyond the intermediate level was still on grammar, rather than the overall development of communicative competence. Over the past few decades, language acquisition theory and empirical studies have proved that grammatical competence is merely a subset of the latter, which cannot and should not replace communicative competence. It is not necessary to dwell on the negative consequences of such misconceptions and ineffectual practice in language teaching anymore.

Another downside is the arbitrariness in text material selection and instructional organization without considering specific and coherent objectives regarding students' performance. Since certain teachers are often designated to be in charge of a specific level for considerable years in some programs, textbook selection and instruction may be more out of personal preferences or convenience instead of informed choices without sufficient coordination and communication. For example, some programs used textbooks such as *Taiwan Today* (Teng and Perry, 1998) or *A Trip to China* (Chou & Wang, 1996) in their 3rd year courses as a sequel to their intermediate level Chinese course (2nd year), in which *Integrated Chinese* Level 2 (Liu and Yao, et al., 1997) or *David and Helen in China* (Zhang

& Meng, et al., 1999) was the text material. The latter were, obviously, similar to if not easier than the former both in content and language. Using text materials with little or even no reasonable increase in degree of difficulty to sequence courses drags the learning process unnecessarily, and may hinder the development of students' communicative competence. From my personal experience, I have met students who, after studying one year at college or a few years at high school, could mumble some words about themselves or their families but failed to engage in a simple conversation with the same content, or who could simply read things written in *pinyin* but failed to recognize characters. I have also taught 3rd year students who were able to answer comprehension questions by using the exact wording cited from the text but unable to paraphrase in their own words the sentences they recited. These are, evidently, instances of lacking proper training in interpersonal and interpretive skills, which in turn indicate the randomness in instructional organization. Such cases, I am sure, are not just personal encounters unique to me, but on the contrary are quite common to teachers of Chinese who have been in the practice for some years.

The fourth negative effect is the disjunction of assessment and instruction. In another study, the author (Cui, 2006a) has found that a considerable number of achievement tests in Chinese programs in China and the United States were loosely or even remotely related to the objectives these programs claim to have. Such disjunction may be attributed to several possible reasons: either the objectives were not stated clearly or properly, or the test developers (usually teachers) forgot the preset objectives (could be by the program director or other teachers), or even worse, had no idea that the main purpose of achievement tests is to assess what and how well students have learned after a period of study, and more importantly, can demonstrate their competence in acts or performance involving the use of the target language. For example, a *conversation* course in a program used the following format in its final exam. It required students to listen to recording and answer 48 multiple choice questions (3 and a half pages, 60% of the total score) first, and then pick a topic from a pool of six to make a paragraph-long speech (40% of the total score). The six topics were things like "talk about the holiday customs of your country", or "my hobbies (sports, music, recreations, etc.)". There is practically no interaction in this exam, either between the teacher and the student, or between students. Such an exam inevitably has very low validity because what it focused on was not the conversational ability of students after they took this *conversation* course for a semester, even though it involved listening and speaking. Another example is the written final exam of an advanced-intermediate (3rd year) level course in a summer intensive program. It contains 3 pages with 4 parts: 1) choose the appropriate words to fill in the

blanks – 15 items, 2) complete sentences with the given words – 8 items, 3) make sentences – 5 items, and 4) use 100-150 characters to answer a question "how much do you understand the geography or history of China?" Without going into the details, simply judging from the face value of this test, we will have no idea if the students, after nine weeks of intensive training, could have achieved more or less the same proficiency compatible to a 3rd year Chinese language course in a reasonably run program in the US at college level.

While some programs (primarily in the US) adopted various levels of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines as objective for different courses, some programs (mostly in China) used the official Chinese proficiency test *HSK* as part of their curriculum objectives. The problem of such practice, actually, was discussed over a decade ago in the field of Chinese language teaching in the US. After reviewing the basic features of curriculum objectives and the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, Cui (1994: 65) argues that since the guidelines are based on a deficit model "The ACTFL Guidelines are, to be precise, assessment criteria only," thus "simply cannot be adopted as curriculum objectives in the teaching of Chinese." Even in the mid-eighties, Galloway took the same position, "As assessment criteria, the level descriptions at times focus less on what the individual *does* and more on what the individual *does not do yet*. In extracurricular performance assessment, such distinctions are crucial, for they establish the accuracy parameters in reference to certain communicative tasks and thus serve to hold level expectations in check. However, because of this focus on deficiencies, the guidelines are inadequate as program goal statements." She further stated that "This curriculum-free nature of the proficiency guidelines limits their direct transportability to curriculum and instruction either as learner goal statements or as learner achievement indicators" (Galloway, 1985:37). As for the official Chinese proficiency test *HSK*, despite all its merits, it is purely a test, which has the same weakness when it is chosen as curriculum objectives. In addition, given the high cost of administrating tests such as the ACTFL oral interviews or the *HSK* to every single student of Chinese language, one has every reason to doubt whether those programs that have used the *HSK* or ACTFL Guidelines as their curriculum objectives really give these tests to their students by the end of each semester. If not, though it does not sound agreeable to hearers, it is like "hang up a sheep's head but sell dog meat (挂羊头卖狗肉) – trying to palm off something inferior to what it purports to be," as the Chinese saying goes. We should, therefore, follow Galloway's advice that "the [ACTFL] guidelines must stand apart from curriculum" (Galloway, 1985:38). The same should be true to the official Chinese proficiency test *HSK*.

Last but not least is the issue of articulation both between courses and cross

programs. In some cases, several programs have identical objectives for sequent courses, which have virtually no indication of any progress from one to another. Here is a typical example,

- Chinese 201 Second-Year Chinese I Objectives:
  1) Carry out a simple face-to-face conversation with ease.
  2) Narrate a simple story or describe a familiar event

- Chinese 202 Second-Year Chinese II Objectives:
  1) Carry out a simple face-to-face conversation with ease.
  2) Narrate a simple story or describe a familiar event.

In other cases, without looking at the course title, we cannot tell which course is more advanced simply by glancing at the objectives of two courses in the same program:

- **Course A**

  This course … continues to develop students' four skills of aurally understanding, speaking, reading and writing. ...With increasing sophistication in terms of style and usage… In this course students are required to comprehend and produce paragraph-level Chinese. Rigorous practice of spoken and written Chinese in complex communicative activities will be conducted. Students will also do intensive reading of expository writings on a variety of cultural topics.

- **Course B**

  This course aims at helping students solidify their ability to comprehend and produce paragraph-level Chinese. It seeks to enable students to understand face-to-face conversations on most familiar topics, give factual accounts, read material written in formal *shu1mian4yu*3 Chinese and write simple essays, reports and all types of correspondence.

In fact, the former is for the second year Chinese course and the latter is for the third year course in the same program. Objectives with such vagueness are not helpful at all to teachers and students.

3. Clarification of some basic terms

In education, while *goals* are general statements about what must be accomplished in order to attain the goals and satisfy students' needs, objectives are more specific statements about what content or skills the students must master in order to achieve a particular goal. Figuratively speaking, curriculum *goals* and

instructional *objectives* are at the two ends of a scale of generality, with the former at the general end and the latter the specific.

According to Brown (2001: 21), in language instruction, "Objectives come in many forms and may differ in degrees of specificity even within a given program primarily because they can serve different student needs that themselves vary in level of specificity." Nevertheless, it is preferable to specify instructional objectives in terms of learners' performance. Since language learning involves a student's mastery of the relevant knowledge and skills, which depends on whether he or she can successfully use the target language to engage in meaningful communication. Therefore, the specification of course objectives in terms of learning outcomes, and normally accompanied with the program's assessment strategy, is crucial to the development of foreign language curriculum. Only when instructional objectives are specifically described as demonstrable acts, namely, learners' actual performance showing the application of relevant knowledge and skills, can we observe and measure the students' performance, and then determine if both the instructor and the students have achieved the goals of the language course. Otherwise, we cannot be confident to say that the students have, not only gone through the process of learning, but also had a fair command of the target language after taking that language course for a certain time. This is the theoretical basis of curriculum development, and also the fundamental rationale behind the development of all the proficiency tests, including the ACTFL Proficiency Oral Interview and its guidelines.

4. The Possible Causes of the Current Problems

4.1. The influence of the Chinese traditional concept of teaching (教书)

Curriculum development, particularly the specification of instructional objectives and the assessment of their achievement, has not been in the tradition of Chinese education. For centuries, "jiāoshū yùrén" (教书育人– impart knowledge and educate people) has been considered the core responsibility of a teacher. As *Han Yu*(韩愈) said, "A teacher's job is to transmit wisdom, impart knowledge, and resolve doubts."[11] Under such influence, a teacher in China was often viewed by others respectfully, but also assumed by oneself subconsciously, as an authority figure who was expected to provide instruction and direct learning. The word *teaching* in Chinese, interestingly enough, is "jiāoshū"(教书), which is "to lecture through the book" in literal translation. It is, accordingly, not farfetched to infer that teaching was teacher-centered and textbook-oriented. To a large extent,

[11] 师者，所以传道、授业、解惑也。- 韩愈《师说》

textbooks were the curriculum, which dictated instruction, and even the imperial examinations. As for what students were able to do to apply the knowledge and had what specific skills after studying all those books, little attention was paid to such questions generations after generation, let alone to assess the differences between students relevant performance before or after schooling. In short, the concept of performance objectives has been a totally strange one in the tradition of Chinese education. The influence of this tradition, unfortunately, has been still lingering in the minds of a lot of teachers of Chinese language both in China and throughout the world. As evidenced in the survey results summarized in Table 1, a total of 109 courses in all these programs have taken textbooks as curriculum objectives (Type 1). In addition, a considerable number of programs, to a certain extent, have expressed their course objectives from the perspective of teachers instead of the students', that is, what teachers are going to do such as "enable the students to…" or "develop the (students') skills of…" , etc. (Types 4 & 5).

4.2. The sequelae of being a cottage industry over a century

Chinese language instruction had been a cottage industry over a century since the language was first offered in the United States (at Harvard) in 1878. For years, it was taught primarily by native speakers of Chinese, or non-native speaking sinologists, who had hardly received any formal training in language pedagogy. Without deprecating the great contributions our predecessors have made, it is a historical fact that "learning through practice" (干中学) was the best in-service-training they could get in those days, and transmission of teaching experience from the older generation mentors to the younger "disciples" was the major mode of teacher training. Since Chinese has long been a less-commonly-taught language, professional training in curriculum design and testing remains a low priority if not completely absent in the agenda of Chinese language teachers' professional development up to the present. Despite the fact that Chinese language teaching has made tremendous progress in recent years and become one of the most popular foreign languages throughout the world, many teachers and even program directors do not have sufficient and adequate understanding of the importance of curriculum objectives, let alone the necessary knowledge and skills to define coherent curriculum objectives in terms of learner performance properly. As pointed out by Zhou Yan (2001:F32), "Because of the heavy teaching load, often time our teachers do not have time to analyze students' needs, not to mention paying attention to curriculum objectives. They tend to simply follow the text materials or the collective teaching plans, but seldom develop instructional objectives of their own according to students' specific

situations or needs."[12] Although this comment is mostly directed toward foreign language teachers in China, it is to some extent also applicable to the situation in the United States. This is closely related to research on curriculum objectives and testing in the field of Chinese language teaching as a whole, which is lagging far, far behind compared with other research areas. A glance at Everson's database of Research in Less Commonly Taught Languages, of the total 77 articles on Chinese teaching and learning published in major professional journals from 1987 to 2005, only 2 touched the subject of learning outcomes (Elder & Manwaring, 2004; and Ke & Reed, 1995), accounting for less than 2.6%. Even the recommendations for basic Chinese and post-basic Chinese instruction made by the CLTA Task Force (The NFLC Guide for Basic Chinese Language Programs, 1997) failed to mention the importance of specifying curriculum objectives in terms of learner performance systematically, though the word "goals" did occur a few times.[13]

A common feature shared by these surveyed programs is that the most of the objectives are the products of teachers' individual effort in isolation. The syllabi collected in this survey show that the ways of expressing instructional objectives for each course varied considerably, even in the same Chinese program. Some teachers told the author that there was no discussion or cooperation whatsoever involved, and they just wrote the syllabus the way they thought it should be, or modeled it after other colleagues'. On the other hand, some program directors said that they did not have a chance to organize meetings with their instructors to discuss the details of instructional objective or even the syllabus, and simply trusted their instructors and approved whatever was submitted.

4.3. Some misconceptions among Chinese language teachers at large

The survey results and interviews, to some extent, reflect certain misconceptions among Chinese language teachers at large. The first may be, perhaps, named as "business as usual". On different occasions, the author has heard repetitively sayings like this, "We have been in this business for years without performance objectives, yet still able to produce excellent learners with high Chi-

[12] The Chinese original – 由于教学任务繁重，我们的老师常常无瑕对自己的学生进行分析，更难以注意到课程的目标，容易跟着教材设计走，跟着集体的教学计划走，却很少想到根据学生的实际情况和需要而制定出自己的教学目标。(周燕)

[13] Kubler, C. 1997:46. "A Framework for Basic Chinese Language Programs", Recommendation 36: *The assessment system should reflect program goals. If the development of listening and speaking skills is included among the program goals, then a way should be found to test these skills on a regular basis.*
Ross, C. 1997: 56. "The Framework for Post-Basic Chinese", Section V. B. Learner's responsibilities 4: *The learner must know what he or she want to accomplish in Chinese and must plan a course of study that will enable him or her to achieve those goals.*

nese proficiency" or "the reputation of a good program comes from its effective instruction, not nicely-written curriculum objectives." While these might be true, does it mean that there is absolutely no more room for further improvement, particularly as a field? How can we be sure that the practice we are so used to and comfortable with is the best way, or even the only way?

The second misconception is that instructional objectives are for "window dressing" only, but have no real use at all. As Chinese instruction has gradually stepped out its cocoon and started to have more exchanges with that of other foreign languages, some teachers might think that it is a trendy thing to do by adding instructional objectives to the existing syllabus. Sometimes, when it is imposed from top-down, teachers might simply act in a perfunctory manner, to make something up, just for the sake of satisfying the department chair or the dean. Either way, it shows that teachers of Chinese have not arrived at a sufficient appreciation of the functions of curriculum objectives, and the relationships between objectives, instruction, and testing.

Another misconception is to equate certain official standards or tests with curriculum objectives. Some programs, a total of 29 courses in this survey, have used certain levels of the *HSK* in China or the ACTFL Guidelines in the U.S. as their instructional objectives. This, naturally, leads to a frequently asked question, "Why do we need to reinvent the wheel when we already have the National Standards and the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines?" As for the National Standards, the document itself has stated very clearly, "The standards are not a curriculum guide. While this document suggests the types of content and curricular experiences needed to enable students to achieve the standards, and supports the ideal of extended sequences of study, it does not describe specific course content, nor a recommended scope and sequence" (Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1996:24). In regard to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, the ACTFL web site provides some sort of answer indirectly to the question under Question 5 in the section of FAQ for the *ACTFL Performance Guidelines*, saying that "The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines describe language performance for adult language users regardless of where, when or how the language is acquired. K-12 Performance Guidelines were designed to help educators better understand the developmental path that language learning takes for students in a classroom setting who are in a continuous process of cognitive development." Without further elaboration, it is crystal clear that standardized test such as the *HSK* or the documents such as the *ACTFL Performance Guidelines* and *National Standards for Foreign Languages* should not be adopted directly as curriculum objectives, whether in high school or college Chinese language programs.

5. Taking the Challenge –Defining Chinese Curriculum Objectives in Terms of Learner Performance

5.1. The necessities

There is no doubt that all Chinese language teachers have the desire to make their teaching effective. However, effective instruction does not fall from the heavens but requires careful planning, regardless of variations of individual teaching style and preferred teaching method. As Hadley (1993: 481) points out, "First, effective teachers plan instruction carefully and effectively. They have a clear idea of what the programmatic and course goals are, and they try to reach those goals by actively involving students in their own learning and appealing to their interests and needs. Obviously, daily planning must be related to an overall curriculum plan if it is to be effective. Therefore, teachers need to be concerned with long-term curriculum goals, and, ideally, should be involved in both the planning and the evaluation of the curriculum in their own institution." While many teachers spend hours and hours preparing and revising their lesson plans every year, very few of them have considered carefully and comprehensively what changes these individual lessons plans, by the end of the course, will bring to their students communicative competence, specifically those acts or performance tasks that can be observed and assessed after they have finished implementing these lesson plans. In the meantime, even when teachers have tried to include specific instructional objectives in their course syllabi, it seldom is seen that teachers in a Chinese program have been invited to sit down together with the program director to discuss the curriculum objectives across all levels in the entire Chinese language program.

According to Brown (2001:75), "Developing statements of perceived needs into program goals, and these in turn into clear objectives, is an effective way to clarify what should be going on in the language classroom. Once having thought through what will be taught in each classroom, planners can make efforts to coordinate across courses and throughout an entire language program. In other words, the process of converting perceptions of students' needs into goals and objectives provides the basic units that can in turn be used to define and organize all teaching activities into a cogent curriculum. Once objectives are in hand, the basic elements of the students' needs can be analyzed, assessed, and classified to create a coherent teaching/learning experience. In short, objectives provide the building blocks from which curriculum can be created, modified, and revised." If what Brown says is correct, then we must think seriously about the foundation on which, and the procedures by which we have been developing our Chinese language curriculum. Yes, textbooks are absolutely necessary and teaching methods

are undoubtedly important. They are, however, not the *building blocks* for curriculum development, modification, or revision. Without clear objectives, it may well be like sailing without a compass, cruising with the wind and drifting along the tide. It might not necessarily bring the passengers to the proper designation however fast the boat and skillful the sailor could be. On the contrary, curriculum objectives described in terms of learners' performance can give a director of Chinese program a whole picture of all the courses at different levels, like a blueprint to an engineer, a graphic image or a miniature model of the completed building to an architect. They facilitate the overseeing of the instructional operation as well as the coordination among teachers throughout the entire program.

Coherent performance objectives enable teachers to see both the woods and the trees. With specific instructional objectives in mind, teachers will have a clear sense of, in addition to the number of characters and lessons to be covered, new words and grammatical structures, what students will be able to do with all these linguistic items, and how well they can perform communicatively upon completion of the course. Whatever a teacher does in class, grammar explanations, mechanical drills, group discussions, interactive activities, all are geared toward the development of students' communicative competence over a period of study. Thus instruction will be more focused, consistent, and effective. It is not unusual for teachers to rotate across sections of the same level or across levels within the same program, or even find personnel changes from time to time. Despite such changes, coherently specified performance objectives can better guarantee instructional consistency and efficiency – two major indicators of overall excellence in a language program suggested by Pennington and Brown (1991).

Clearly stated performance objectives can help teachers develop better achievement tests at different instructional stages to accurately assess students' linguistic knowledge and communicative competence, which may avoid unnecessary fumbling or randomness. They can also objectively indicate students' strengths as well as weaknesses, providing teachers with necessary diagnosis and remedy in a timely fashion. In addition, this may lead to better communication among teachers within the same level of courses and more effective coordination and smoother articulation across levels.

Performance objectives can also serve as a mechanism for students to take better control of their own study and motive them constantly. These objectives, to some extent, are like a road map that can give students a clear idea of the path they have traveled through, what they are already able to do with the target language at a given stage, and where they will arrive ultimately in terms of their communicative skills by the end of a course. Since these learning outcomes are observable and measurable, with or without the help of the instructor, students

may check themselves periodically on how they are progressing, and compare the distance between their current status and the expected performance. They may, accordingly, make due adjustments to their learning strategies, time allocation, effort distribution, etc. to overcome the shortcomings of their own. They may also be better prepared for the upcoming tests or exams as they know in advance on what specific "performance" they should focus their review. Thus students tend to be more actively engaged in learning. Another positive side-effect, possibly, is that when some students are anxious about their grade during the semester, or even when a few of them come to the instructor to ask for a grade at the end of the semester, the pre-determined performance objectives may serve as a tool to ease anxiety or to remind those with unreasonable demands by showing the distance between the expected learning outcomes and the students' actual performance.

5.2. The basic guidelines for designing performance objectives

A lucid statement of a curriculum objective, according to Brown (2001:86), should contain five elements,

1. subject – namely, the students who participate in the learning activities,
2. performance – what the learners can do with the target language,
3. conditions – under what circumstances the performance will take place,
4. measure – how the desired performance will be observed, and
5. criterion – the standard based on which a decision is made whether the learners succeed (or pass).

The following example illustrates how these elements work together in an instructional objective for an English writing course (adapted and modified from Brown, 2001:89).

By the end level C, the students [***subject***] will be able to:

1. Fill in missing elements [***performance***] on the appropriate lines [***measure***] in a graph, chart, or diagram from information provided in a 600-word 11th grade reading level general science passage [***conditions***], with fewer than 3 grammatical and 8 spelling errors [***criterion***][14].

[14] The italics in the brackets and the last part "with fewer than 3 grammatical and 8 spelling errors [criterion]" were added by the author for the sake of illustration. Actually, Brown holds that stating the level of accuracy explicitly in objectives might be problematic for "there are only 'rules of thumb' to go by in setting such levels." For details, please refer to Brown (2001:90).

The course objectives of Elementary Chinese I (101) and II (102) in the appendix are an attempt to model after Brown's in accordance to the particular situations of the Chinese language program in a liberal arts college where the author teaches. As part of our Chinese curriculum, it is still very primitive and undergoing constant revisions "to respond to changes in perceptions of students' needs and to changes in the types of students who are being served" (Brown, 2001:96). Efforts have been made to connect and incorporate relevant objectives in the same skill areas between courses. For example, the objective for learning *pinyin* (Chinese 101) states that,

By the end of the semester, students will achieve the following:

A) Ability to distinguish by ear, to pronounce, and to write individual syllables and disyllabic words in the phonetic Romanization system (*hànyǔ pīnyīn*) of modern standard Chinese (Mandarin) with tones marked, with an accuracy of 85% for initials and 75% for finals in any perceived syllables.

A similar objective in Chinese 102 says that,

By the end of the semester, students will achieve the following:

A) Ability to distinguish by ear, to pronounce, and to write individual syllables and polysyllabic words in the phonetic Romanization system (*hànǔ pīnyīn*) of modern standard Chinese (Mandarin) with tones marked, with at least 85-90% accuracy in all perceived syllables, including unknown words.

To assess the achievement of such objectives, similar test items have been included in both final exams of Chinese 101 and 102, which require students to write down unknown words and phrases in *pinyin* dictated by the teacher. After repetitive trials and revisions, the criterion was set as such, which has proved to be fair and reachable through practices. It should be emphasized that this is by no means a one-size-fits-all model that can be copied indiscriminately by any other programs. As a matter of fact, it is vital for other Chinese programs that wish to include performance objectives in their curriculum to take into consideration their specific conditions, particularly factors such as human resources, weekly instructional hours, teaching material adaptation and development, as well as institutional or major requirements, etc.

While performance objectives are not panacea, having systematic specification of performance objectives is definitely better than none, or some vaguely stated, incoherent, simplistic ones. With the rapid development of Chinese language teaching and learning worldwide, particularly after the formal offer of

Chinese AP courses and AP exams, Chinese language teachers are facing an unprecedented and the biggest challenge ever, that is, the articulation vertically from kindergarten to college (K-16), and/or transfer horizontally across programs or institutions. We can no longer afford to remain in the same mindset of "business as usual" and stick to conventions. It is true that in the field of Chinese language teaching, so far, there is not a single set of systematically developed curriculum objectives in terms of learner performance and the corresponding tests that have been empirically validated all the way from beginning level to advanced level, but this should not be the excuse for non-action. Waiting passively is simple not an option. As a profession, we must rise to the challenge collectively and unflinchingly.

Although so far no existing well-developed Chinese language curriculum objectives can serve as a model, Brown's systematic approach (2001) for program development is an excellent reference. The recently published *International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education* by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (*Hànbàn*) is a constructive attempt and bold innovation, considering its timing, scope and scale in particular. Other documents such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and the ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners are also very useful resources for the development of performance objectives. In addition, some performance objectives found in this survey (see 2.2.7 above), have given an inkling of the proper way to express curriculum objectives. They are, actually, a good starting point to tackle the problem in spite of their crudeness. If every objective is stated consistently from the perspective of students, and describes clearly the expected performance (including various language skills and performance) under specific conditions and with explicit gauging criterion, step by step, the development of coherent performance objectives for a Chinese program as a whole is definitely possible. As long as we take this challenge seriously, and particularly teachers of every each Chinese language program take concrete actions, devoting sufficient time and effort steadfastly to the specification of curriculum objectives according to its own specific situations, systematically defined performance objectives will by no means be merely a mirage. Such performance objectives, together with the corresponding tests that can accurately assess the achievement of these objectives, will greatly help improve our instruction.

6. Conclusion

Although no consistent curriculum objectives are found in this survey across the Chinese programs following the ideal model as Brown suggests, it is a positive sign that more Chinese programs, both in China and the United States, have included some sort of instructional objectives in their course syllabi. This is, at least, a breakaway from the old tradition – relying on textbooks only. It is even more encouraging to see that 48 courses in Chinese programs in the US have begun to describe instructional objectives in terms of leaner performance, although they are still in embryonic form, and have a lot of room for improvement. The author believes that as long as there is something to start with, it is always better than years of empty talks but produce nothing substantial. It is precisely such a desire that motivated the inclusion in the appendix the Chinese 101 and 102 course objectives drafted by the author. They serve more as a "brick cast to attract jade" (引玉之砖) than a model for emulation, with the hope that other colleagues may come up with valuable insight and suggestions. If we can follow the proper procedures suggested by Brown (2001), analyze the strengths and weaknesses of any exiting instructional objectives according to the specific situations of each individual program, we can gradually come up with better versions of performance objectives, course by course, and finally develop a set of coherent curriculum objectives with consistent format. With these performance objectives in hand, we can adjust our teaching, and also revise or even develop new tests for each course, so as to assess how well students in a program may have achieved the performance objectives set by the collective efforts of both teachers and program director.

At present, Chinese language instruction is at a critical moment of historical development. With decades of unremitting efforts of the Chinese language educators and teachers in China and also throughout the world, it has won increasing popularity worldwide in the 21st century. Likewise, this language, once considered as "true-foreign" or even "exotic", is forging ahead into the mainstream of foreign language education in the United States. As more and more schools from K-12, and colleges and universities offer Chinese language courses, particularly with the formal adoption of the Chinese AP Exam by the College Board in 2007, Chinese is booming unprecedentedly both at pace and in scale throughout the nation. To cope with the new situation, we teachers of Chinese language can no longer remain in the habitual mindset and stick to conventional practices. If we really want to bring TCFL/TCSL to the next level, it is high time for us to take concrete actions, to deepen our understanding of the significance of curriculum objectives, organize discussions and workshops, and develop both practical and

systematic curriculum objectives as well as corresponding valid tests for specific programs that can effectively guide and assess our teaching and students' learning.

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Appendix

Elementary Chinese (101) Course Objectives

By the end of the semester, students will achieve the following:

A) Ability to distinguish by ear, to pronounce, and to write individual syllables and disyllabic words in the phonetic Romanization system (*hànyǔ pīnyīn*) of modern standard Chinese (Mandarin) with tones marked, with an accuracy of 85% for initials and 75% for finals in any perceived syllables.

B) Ability to listen to short face-to-face conversations and simple recorded passages at the speed of 60-70 syllables/minute (with two repetitions when necessary), and understand about 75% of the main ideas on familiar topics of self-introduction, family, daily routine activities at school, narratives simple events and descriptions of familiar objects, etc.

C) Ability to use actively for communication the basic grammatical structures and vocabulary introduced in the course.

D) Ability to perform the following communicative functions mostly in

face-to-face interactions with acceptable linguistic accuracy and social-cultural appropriateness:

- Greeting and farewell
- Expressing/responding to gratitude
- Apologizing/responding to apology
- Giving/responding to simple commands
- Identify people/objects
- Briefly introducing a person/oneself
- Using various question forms to seek information
- Asking a reason/for an explanation
- Asking for help/favors
- Asking for suggestions/simple opinions
- Making/responding to an invitation
- Confirming/denying
- Making simple hypotheses
- Narrating some simple personal events/activities
- Describing:
  Colors, size, general states/conditions, quality, quantity, degree, simple results/manner ("how" some activities/actions are performed), etc.
- Exchanging information about:
  One's own self, significant family members and friends, everyday life and some routine activities, likes and dislikes, time, days and dates, basic feelings, etc.
- Handling situations of survival/daily life such as:
  Asking/telling time, shopping and money units, making/responding to requests, making an appointment, taking public transportation, etc.

E) Ability to recognize approximately 350 characters in the simplified form, and to read and comprehend simple passages written in simplified Chinese characters.

F) Ability to write from memory about 200 most frequently used characters, and to write short notes or passages about simple topics such as basic personal information, significant family members and friends, daily routine activities, etc., using a mixture of both Romanization (*hǎnyǔ pīnyīn*) and simplified characters.

Elementary Chinese (102) Course Objectives

By the end of the semester, students will achieve the following:

A) Ability to distinguish by ear, to pronounce, and to write individual syllables and polysyllabic words in the phonetic Romanization system (*hànyǔ pīnyīn*) of modern standard Chinese (Mandarin) with tones marked, with at least 85-90% accuracy in all perceived syllables, including unknown words.

B) Ability to listen to short face-to-face conversations and simple recorded passages at the speed of 60-70 syllables/minute (with two repetitions when necessary), and understand about 75% of the main ideas on familiar survival topics such as dinning, weather forecast, asking/giving directions, seeing a doctor, sports, travel, etc.

C) Ability to use actively for communication the basic grammatical structures and vocabulary introduced in the course.

D) Ability to perform the following communicative functions in face-to-face social interactions and in simple role-play telephone conversations, in strings of sentences with some use of transitional words, considerable linguistic accuracy, social-cultural appropriateness, and rudimentary fluency:
   - Dinning in a Chinese restaurant and ordering a meal
   - Asking/giving directions
   - Seeing a doctor and discuss some personal health problems
   - Making comparisons
   - Making a (role-play) telephone call and scheduling an appointment
   - Renting an apartment
   - Reserving a flight ticket
   - Describing briefly the physical surrounding, a person's facial features, action duration, result, possibility, simple feelings and emotions, etc.
   - Exchange brief information and simple personal opinions on familiar topics such as family and friends, sports, travel and transportation, future plan, etc.

E) Ability to recognize and to write approximately 700 Chinese characters in the simplified form, and to read and comprehend simple, short passages (about 2 paragraphs) written in simplified characters.

F) Ability to write from memory about 550 most frequently used characters, and to write simple passages with one to two paragraph (about 200 – 300 characters) in a combination of characters and *pinyin* for daily purposes such as short notes, personal letters, short skits or stories, etc.

G) Ability to use a Chinese-English dictionary to look up the meaning any usage of new words.