



Preschool teacher Ying Liang grew up in mainland China where she experienced a highly teacher-directed education. Even as a young child, she bristled against these schooling practices that so strongly limited her self-determination and voice. Ying currently teaches in the United States, working in a Mandarin immersion school with 4- and 5-year-old children. The school's philosophy is traditional, expecting teachers' primary approach to language instruction to be through direct translation, with the children immediately repeating the teacher's model. Instead, Ying recognized the opportunity to share power in the teaching and learning exchange. Thus, she focused a large portion of her Mandarin language instruction around the children's own creative writing, which was done through dictation, the co-construction of stories through drawing and dramatic play, and eventually some scaffolded writing using Chinese characters. In this article, Ying traces the developmental progress of the children as authors and communicators in Mandarin. She also explores the topics the girls and boys chose to write about to analyze what these stories tell about the children's developing self-identities and language abilities.

—Barbara Henderson

# A Journey of Journals: Promoting Child-Centered Second-Language Acquisition in Preschool

**Adam:** This was a big tornado. It went around and around and around. And there was an airplane flying here but then crashed because the tornado just hit it.

**Ying** (translating Adam's dictation): 從前有一個龍捲風, 它在轉啊轉啊轉啊, 然後有一架飛機要飛過, 可是龍捲風打到它, 所以它掉下來了。然後呢?

**Adam:** And then the tornado . . .

**Ying:** 然后那个龍捲風 [That's the tornado] 就是龍捲風, 龍捲風怎麼了。 [Tornado is tornado. What happened to the tornado?]

**Adam** (pauses for three seconds): 完結了 [The end.]

It was afternoon in my Mandarin immersion preschool classroom, and children who were done sleeping went to the table to start drawing and writing in their journals. Half an hour later, we allowed the children to take turns sharing their journal stories in circle time for 15 minutes. This was the afternoon routine that I had developed at the beginning of the school year, with the goal of supporting children's developing creativity and encouraging them to speak publicly in Mandarin. Adam, a 5-year-old East Indian boy, was describing his drawing by telling a story about a tornado, but he lost interest in speaking after I reinforced that he should repeat my words in Mandarin.

I understood how Adam was feeling because I had received teacher-directed education when I was his age. At that time, I felt no passion for classroom activities because all I was doing was following teachers' instructions. Even as a 4-year-old, I already had many questions about why we had to listen to the teacher and do what she told us. How did she



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Photos courtesy of the author.



know what she did was what we needed? I wanted to grow up because I had a dream: I wanted to be the one who had the power. Now I am a teacher, I became the one who has the power, but reflecting on my classroom practices I find that they are far more similar to what I experienced as a child than I would have imagined. This study has led me to realize that my teaching methods, despite my best intentions, were still limiting children's power in their learning process.

In part, my teaching practices result from my teaching context, which is a Mandarin immersion school embracing a theme-based curriculum and providing strong Mandarin-focused activities. I wanted to follow the school's approach, but I also felt the importance of giving children opportunities to express their ideas and explore their interests, even when they were using English to communicate. I found it was difficult to decide whether I should support children's ideas even when they spoke in English, or if I should reinforce the Chinese by having them repeat my translation right away. I wanted to do something that would allow children to have more power in the learning process but at the same time ensure that they were learning Chinese. Thus, I arrived at my teacher research question: How can I give the children power over their learning while at the same time supporting their Mandarin acquisition?

I used teacher research for this study because, as Meier and Henderson (2007) observe, it allows teachers to challenge their own beliefs, to deconstruct and reform their educational approaches and philosophies through carefully planned and systematic actions that change and improve their daily practice. Through teacher research, teachers find their own voices and find a way to make their voices heard. What's more, by presenting children's learning and thinking to the public, teachers amplify children's voices. According to Ballenger, "Teacher research lets the children, whoever they are, teach you—both about themselves and about their view of the domain you are jointly studying—while you are teaching them" (1999, 9). In conducting teacher research in the classroom, teachers position themselves as learners and receive a parallel inquiry experience as they inquire into how children think.

## Review of literature

Like the air we breathe, we sometimes take written communication for granted. We read and write to communicate with other human beings, to connect with one other. Gadzikowski emphasizes, "Stories and storytelling help us build relationships, share culture, explore our identities, and in some cases, reconcile difficult emotions" (2007, 8). Stories are particularly important in multicultural classrooms because, through stories, children are exposed to different cultures. "Stories are a culture's coin and currency" (Bruner 2002, 15). Thus, when stories are integrated into second-language teaching, children will not only become bilingual but also bicultural.

We don't need to teach young children how to read and write word by word, but by supporting them to develop their own stories, they learn how words can represent meaning. Children are actually creating stories in their everyday play. Play and narrative are closely intertwined in young children's experience and development. As Paley says, "Fantasy play is the glue that binds together all other pursuits, including the early teaching of reading and writing" (2004, 8).

Corsaro (2013) says that children's social and language skills are the bridge to children's success in formal schooling. Agreeing with him, I believe language teaching should focus on more than just language skills. Attention should be placed on how children use language to fulfill their social needs and on how language is supporting children's development in other learning domains.

Gee (2004) argues that children learn a language best through what he calls "the culture process," wherein words and sentences are immersed in daily social interactions. He believes the traditional skill-driven method of teaching language lacks connections to children's social context. Gee's argument led us (myself and my assistant teacher) to rethink our current language teaching approaches. I began to question whether we were overemphasizing second-language acquisition. Might that have blinded us from seeing children's development in other areas? Sometimes we put too much focus on teaching children how to pronounce a word in the target language (Mandarin, in the case of our school), and we forget about children's other learning needs. When this becomes our emphasis as teachers, learning a second language becomes teacher directed, and children lose motivation.

I use journals to help children develop their comprehension and storytelling abilities because, in my opinion, a personal journal provides a space where children can learn to tell a coherent story, even when that process begins through drawing. These journal stories may lack structure and grammar, but they give children freedom to imagine and create. Furthermore, when teachers take dictation from children to document children's storytelling, both teachers and parents have a visual tool that allows us to enter into and reflect on children's worlds.

## Methods

### Participants and setting

I conducted this teacher research in my own classroom in a Chinese immersion school in San Francisco. During the 2013–2014 school year, I taught 20 children ages 4 to 5 years old alongside my assistant teacher, who has been working in this program for seven years. The children all had varying cultural backgrounds, preschool experience, and levels of Mandarin exposure. From September to May, every afternoon after nap time, I would provide a journal book, some provocation pictures and Chinese characters, and writing tools on the table for children to draw in their journal.

## Research plan

Although I have used journaling before (albeit with a younger group of 3-year-olds), this was my first time introducing journaling with the 4- and 5-year-old group. I implemented the following techniques to be more intentional about journaling as a means of second-language acquisition:

1. As I described earlier, I had the children journal on a daily basis, following a consistent pattern at the same time each day.
2. I added some provocations, such as Chinese character prints on the journal paper, to encourage children's use of the target language.
3. In addition to having the children share the stories they created through their drawings at circle time every day, I added other related activities, such as dramatic play. We also helped the children create their own storybooks.

## Data sources and collection methods

Throughout the school year, I collected four major kinds of data:

- Children's journal samples
- Audio recordings and storytelling transcripts
- Photographs
- Teaching journals

I collected children's journal samples every week, along with my story dictation. Sometimes I included audio recordings of children telling their stories. I took pictures of children working on their journals, which captured them drawing and speaking. I kept a teaching journal to jot down questions and thoughts, and this writing was my main source of reflection.

## Findings

Through this study, journaling developed a child-centered Mandarin climate in our classroom. The school year began with us encouraging children to draw stories in their journals and ended with children eager to share their journals. It began with pushing children to tell stories in Chinese and ended with children naturally and confidently dictating their stories to us in Chinese. The children's interest arising from their stories became the main power for bringing new Chinese vocabulary into the classroom as they asked us for words in Chinese.

Beyond language acquisition, I found other important social and cultural dynamics embedded in children's stories. These were more valuable findings because language and culture are entwined. The environment that children are surrounded with will affect the way they use a language. Reflecting on this insight, my teaching journal provided the following findings:



1. Copying—both from books and their peers—was an effective tool for helping the children learn drawing and language skills and for building peer relationships
2. Girls became powerful by playing teachers in their drawings and dramatized stories
3. Boys became powerful by talking about school taboos like shooting, fighting, and dying
4. Children used stories as a way to address their social and emotional needs

“In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (Vygotsky, as cited in Rogoff 2003, 298). Similarly, I found that through storytelling, the children spoke and acted differently than they did in their daily lives; it was like they were creating another self in their stories.

### 1. Copying—both from books and their peers—was an effective tool for helping the children learn drawing and language skills and for building peer relationships

One morning during circle time, I read a book translated as *Nana the Young Duck*, written by Jincheng Zhengzi. The story was about a mommy duck who wanted to take her ten ducklings to bathe in the river. The smallest duck was playing around on the way, which brought a lot of trouble to the mommy duck. In the afternoon’s journal, Tracy (top drawing) and Leanne (bottom drawing) both told a similar story about ducks. Tracy told me the following story.

**Tracy:** 有一天，有一個鴨子媽媽和鴨子小孩子們。  
[One day, there was a mommy duck and baby ducks.]

**Ying:** 有幾個小孩子呢？ [How many baby ducks?]

**Tracy:** 1,2,3,4, 我寫了在這裡，所以大家知道” [One, two, three, four. I wrote it here.]

**Ying:** 他們要去做什麼啊？ [What are they doing?]

**Tracy:** 她要去找那個彩虹，她不知道彩虹在哪裡？  
[She’s looking for the rainbow, she doesn’t know where it is.]

**Ying** (Looking in her eyes and nodding my head): 她要去找那個彩虹，可是她不知道彩虹在哪裡？ [She’s looking for the rainbow, but she doesn’t know where it is.]



**Tracy** (acknowledging and applying the difference in my wording): 所以媽媽就跟小鴨子叫呱呱。然後她走走走到彩虹了。可是有一個大風在彩虹旁邊。所以她到家裡了。[The mommy duck says, “Quack, quack, quack,” then she walks to the rainbow, but there’s a big wind next to the rainbow, so she arrives home.]

**Ying:** 所以鴨子們被吹到家裡了。[The ducks arrive home because they were blown by the wind.]

**Tracy:** 所以鴨子們被吹到家裡了。可是沒有關係，因為他們到家裡吃東西，小鴨子很高興。完結了。[The ducks arrive home because they were blown by the wind. It’s okay because they can eat. The ducks are happy. The end.]

Leanne’s story was about a mommy duck playing ball with her baby ducks. Noticing that her drawing was very similar to Tracy’s, I asked her where she got her idea. She answered, “I saw Tracy draw it, and I copied her.” Tracy responded to Leanne’s copying positively, saying, “I can show you how to draw a mommy duck and a baby duck.”

Both Tracy’s and Leanne’s drawings contained some elements from the story, but they also added their own ideas. I saw that *Nana the Young Duck* served as a platform in the girls’ storytelling process. They copied the beginning of the story, borrowed ideas from other parts of the story, and then extended it with their own ideas.

At times, children would work together to co-construct a story, as the pictures to the left show Sasha and Lauren doing. They discussed how the story would go while they drew, borrowing ideas from each other throughout the process.

Copying was an effective tool for the children to learn and build relationships with their peers as they learned from and with each other. By copying their friends, they learned more about how to draw and also how to say more words in Mandarin. The one who was being copied developed self-esteem because she felt proud to be teaching others. The one who was copied felt that she was cared about and loved by her friend.

## 2. Girls became powerful by playing teachers in their drawings and dramatized stories

Because my goal was to give children power over their own learning, I paid close attention to the types of situations that gave children a sense of





power. As a general rule, these situations proved to be different for girls and boys. As the school year progressed, the girls began to incorporate the idea of being a teacher into their stories. Although both boys and girls began to copy my words in their daily conversations—especially my instructions to “be quiet,” “please sit down,” and so on—it was the girls who expressed power in pretending to be a teacher through their stories and dramatic play. Kathy dictated the following story to me from her journal.

有一天，有一個人在推小朋友，小朋友哭了。我說：“我靜婷是排隊小隊長。你們可以插隊嗎？還有你們不可以講傷害別人的話。你們講話要舉手，我就會選你發言。”完結了。[One day, a child was pushing another child and made her cry. I said: “Kathy is the leader for today, can you cut the line? We can’t say things that hurt people’s feelings, and if you want to speak you need to raise your hand, and I will pick you.” The end.]

After Kathy read her story, we had the following conversation.

**Ying:** 我看到靜婷把中文字圈起來了，為什麼呢？ [I saw that Kathy circled the words. Why?]

**Kathy:** 因為這樣我知道今天是星期二。[That’s how I know today is Tuesday.]

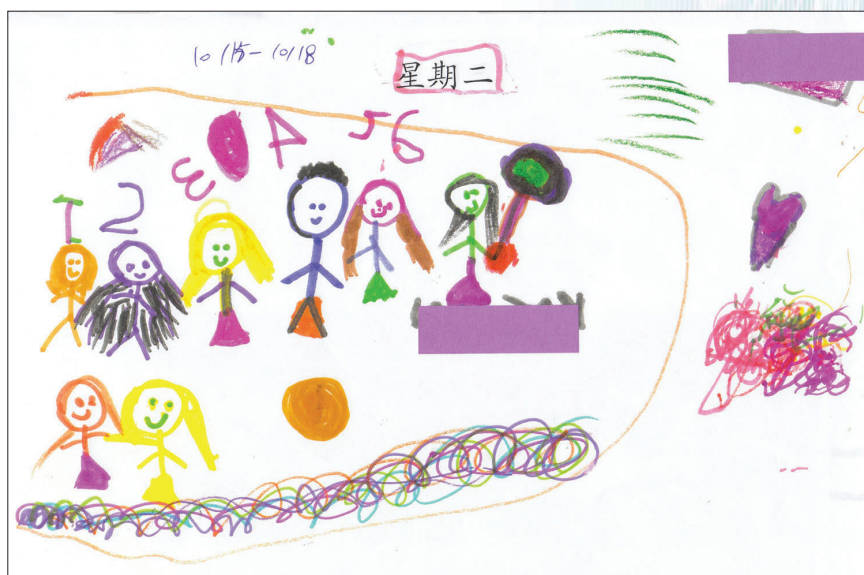
**Ying:** 我看到你寫數字在小朋友的頭上，一，二，三，四，五，六。[I saw that you wrote numbers on top of the children’s heads: one, two, three, four, five, six.]

**Chris:** 我也會 [I can write numbers. too.]

**Rosanne:** 我也會 [I can write numbers, too.]

From Kathy’s drawing, I could see that she was aware of Chinese characters because she circled them. She also wrote English numerals above the children’s heads. This idea might come from our class story times. When I read to children, I point to the Chinese characters in the book so children can recognize them later during other activities. Kathy’s drawing showed me that children develop their early literacy understanding from reading books. As I described her drawing to other children, I raised their awareness of print in journaling, too. When I read out the numbers in the journal, I was introducing them to the function of writing, which is to share information.

The girls’ desire to act out the role of teacher was also apparent in their dramatic play, which is another effective way for children to develop language and literacy skills through storytelling. In the following exchange,





Kathy, Leanne, and Rosanne were playing teachers.

**Kathy:** 你和欣欣是新聞報導員，你們可以用這個手手指字，我是老師我要跟小朋友唱歌。 [You and Rosanne are the news reporter, so you can use the pointer to point to the characters. I am the teacher, so I will sing songs with children.]

**Leanne** (flips the three minute timer): 你可以做三分鐘，然後到我，然後到欣欣。 [You can be the teacher for three minutes, and then it is my turn, and then it is Rosanne's turn.]

Rosanne nodded her head. Kathy looked at the carpet, pretending there were children sitting there.

**Kathy:** 準備好了嗎？一，二，三。 [Are you ready? One, two, three.]

I started the music, and Leanne and Rosanne pointed to the words on the lyrics poster. Kathy looked at the words and danced.

In both their journals and their play, the girls enjoyed expressing power in their role as the teacher. In both examples I shared, the girls showed



confidence to use my words fluently as they took on the persona of the teacher, acting out or writing my words in a meaningful context. They also copied my tone, seeming to understand that certain words became powerful when spoken with a firm tone.

While the “I am the teacher” theme tended to be popular among girls as a way of becoming powerful, the boys were interested in talking about school taboos.

### 3. Boys became powerful by talking about school taboos

like shooting, fighting, and dying

**Andrew** (shooting with fingers): Chui, chui.

**Don:** Ying Laoshi, Andrew is shooting!

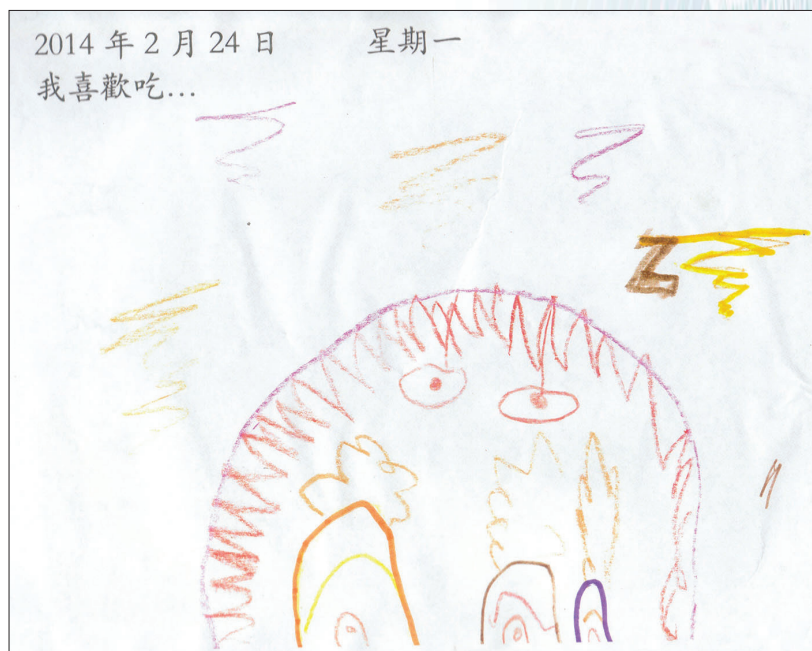
**Ying:** Andrew, do you see that your friend feels uncomfortable about what you are playing? That's why we don't play it at school.

Shooting, fighting, and dying: these are taboo topics for preschoolers. At our school, we forbid children to talk about these topics because we think that children are too young to understand death. We stop children from playing shooting and fighting games because we worry this type of play may cause aggressive behaviors. We are trying so hard to make this content

disappear in the children's physical world, but I found that these topics are highly popular in the boys' journal entries. Here is one example from Chris's journal (pictured below).

有一天，有一個大灰狼，在洞洞裡面，然後它把人家弄死掉。然後有六個龍捲風。因為大灰狼在用力地走，然後就會有龍捲風，然後人全部都死掉了。你看不到人，因為他們全部都在泥土裡面，完結了。[One day, there was a big wolf, inside the cave. He killed all the people. Then there were six tornadoes. Because the wolf walked with super strength, it made the tornado, and people all died. You can't see the people because they are buried under the ground already. The end.]

Fighting is another popular taboo topic at school. Our school's belief is that stopping children's talk about fighting is a good way to stop them from forming aggressive behavior and that forbidding children to say words such as *hit*, *shoot*, *hurt*, and *punch* makes it clear that fighting is unacceptable behavior. However, I've found that the more I try to gloss over or squelch these words, the more they appear in children's journals and their dramatic play. Andrew played out the following story from his journal (pictured on the next page) during circle time. He rolled some paper to create a spike and a shooting machine and asked Don (his best friend), Chris, and Evan to participate in the play.



**Andrew:** 有一天，有一個房子，在旁邊有一個忍者。[One day, there was a house. And there was a ninja on one side of the house.]

As Andrew told the story, Chris, who pretended to be the ninja, moved to stand next to the table.

**Andrew:** 在另外一個旁邊，有兩個士兵。[Two soldiers were on the other side of the house].

Don and Evan moved to the other side of the table. All four children were smiling continuously as the two teams hid from each other.

**Andrew:** 有一個機器人在發射東西。有爆炸，還射出火箭。有一個火箭打中一個士兵，那個士兵拿著一個長釘武器。然後爆炸了。有一個小朋友站在牆上，他在控制那個機器人。還有。。。。。。機器人在射太陽，完。[The robot was shooting, an explosion on the rocket ship. The rocket ship was shooting the soldiers, and the spike on one soldier's hand. It made a small explosion. There was a child standing on the wall, he was controlling the shooting robot, the robot was also shooting the sun. The end.]



When Andrew said that the robot was shooting and creating explosions, Chris shot Don with the paper machine and Don fought back with the paper spike.

**Chris:** Chui, chui.

**Don:** Chui, chui, chui, chui.

Evan was pretending to control the robot and moved his arms like a windmill. The audience was very excited to witness this scene, and they were using their fingers to pretend to shoot. All of a sudden, the classroom was filled with the sound of “chui, chui, chui” as other children joined in their dramatic play.

What interested me most from the examples above was that the children were all able to tell stories about fighting and dying fluently in Chinese. Because these were taboo topics, most of the words the boys used to tell

these stories—for example, 龍捲風 [tornado], 爆炸 [explosion], and 忍者 [ninja]—were words that they might have heard only once from me, but they remembered them right away. This finding tells me that children learn words faster and better when they have an interest in them, and it inspires me to think about improving my teaching by incorporating children’s interests into language learning. For example, in the example above, I could relate Andrew’s story to an animal theme by prompting questions such as, “What are your favorite animals? What do you think they will do when they fight with each other?”



#### 4. Children used stories as a way to address their social and emotional needs

I realized when the boys used their stories to talk about topics that are taboo in our classroom that the children were using stories as a way to address their social and emotional needs. Certainly, children had been exposed to fighting and dying through media such as television, movies, and fairy tales, but their need to talk about it was not being met in our classroom activities except when drawing journal stories. Stories gave children opportunities to talk about and act out taboo topics in a socially accepted

context. In stories, children were free from the limitations of the physical world, and they could do whatever they wanted without worrying about being criticized. Stories motivated children to learn the vocabulary that they wanted to know and also enabled them to use the vocabulary that they had already known.

## Discussion and implications

### From learning a language to learning through a language

I was pleased to meet my goal of giving children power over their learning while at the same time supporting their Mandarin acquisition, as the children clearly became more confident in their use of Mandarin as the school year progressed. Taking dictation was a crucial component of giving children power over their learning because not only did it show children the use of literacy, but it also showed them my respect for their ideas and their efforts to use Chinese. As Edwards says, “‘Listening’ means being fully attentive to the children and, at the same time, taking responsibility for recording and documenting what is observed and then using it as a basis for decision making shared with children and parents” (2012, 151). My role switched from instructor to facilitator as I partnered with the children in their decision making.

This study also made me aware of how our simple daily responses and actions prior to the study were negatively affecting the way children were building up the image of themselves in the target language. As children are learning a new language, they are also developing a new self-image. They are internalizing who they are from the language a teacher uses to describe them. For example, a child may think that he is 粗魯 [rough] if he often hears this word from the teacher. As Bruner stated, “the images and stories that we provide for guidance to speakers with respect to when they may speak and what they may say in what situations may indeed be a first constraint on the nature of selfhood” (1986, 66). Thus, I want to advocate that language teachers should always reflect on and reexamine their practices; we want to be careful of the way we deliver language. We want to give children the tool (the surface structure of the target language), but we don’t want to regulate their minds with this tool. We accomplished this in our classroom by valuing children’s interests.

### Appreciating children’s interests

Oftentimes we found ourselves asking children to stop when they behaved outside of our expectations. We stopped them when they used silly words, we punished them when they played roughly; we were just like police officers making sure that children were not making trouble. But really, what is this trouble? What is our understanding of this trouble? Are we taught to see these behaviors as trouble? Or do we simply feel annoyed?



Corsaro urges teachers to “develop a better appreciation of the complexity of kids’ cultures by remembering that they arise out of the highly diverse and complex adult cultures and societies in which they are embedded” (2003, 194). School taboos proved to be one area where I needed to learn to value children’s interests. The children spoke to me because they were curious about topics related to death. Not being able to get the information from teachers and being forbidden to talk about it had made the children even more eager to learn. Naturally I wanted to respect my school’s philosophy on this point, but I also wanted to provide a safe and acceptable outlet for children to discuss and learn about these topics that so interested them. When journaling provided that outlet, children repeatedly jumped at the chance to talk about what truly interested them. As Paley says, “We have forgotten what is like to be a child; therefore we must begin to watch and to listen to the children” (2004, 3). Through these observations, we must develop an understanding and an appreciation for children’s interests before we think about how to teach them. We are not teaching children to be what we want, but we are nurturing them based on who they are.

### Boy power versus girl power

In our society, boys are generally considered to be aggressive, while girls are considered to be obedient. Yet I found through my study that both genders made choices to exercise control and gain power. Girls chose to imitate teachers to gain this power, while boys chose to use fighting and other dramatic stories. The practices were different, but their intentions were the same. We should be careful of this gender bias in the form of accepting girls’ behavior while condemning boys’ behavior. Children are influenced by others’ attitudes about gender behavior, and this influence will affect how they develop self-identity (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2012). Teachers of young children should not let society shape the image of children in our minds, and we should not let our perspectives overly influence the way children look at themselves. There is nothing wrong with boys’ intention to have power; it is the teachers who need to create socially acceptable contexts for them to express this intention—through opportunities such as journaling and dramatic play.

## Recommendations

In light of this teacher research, I want to make the following recommendations for teachers, parents, and administrators working in the field of second-language education.

- 1. Implement classrooms with low child-teacher ratios.** Language learning requires a lot of conversations to take place between the teacher and children. Acquiring the target language cannot happen if teachers are not using the language with the children.

- 2. Respect your children's culture.** Know that when we are teaching a language, we are also introducing a culture that is entwined with the language. This is a very complicated process for children while they are still at the early stages of figuring out how the world around them works. Therefore I suggest that teachers should have not only language teaching skills, but also an understanding of child development.
- 3. Relationship building.** If I don't know you, why should I talk to you? If I don't like you, why should I talk to you in your language? Language is a tool of communication, and effective communication is based on relationship. Building up relationships with language learners is the foundation of making learning happen.
- 4. Use inquiry language to foster children's thinking.** Whether in their first language or second, inquiry-based language is helpful to support children's thinking skills. In second-language acquisition, helping children to think in the target language is a stepping stone for children to develop a new self-identity in the target language.
- 5. Use storytelling and story dictation.** Stories are essential to young children's language acquisition, but in order to see results, storytelling and dictation require time and consistency. This is why I strongly recommend having children keep journals in every language environment. At the same time, I advocate that teachers keep these activities fun and motivating for children; it is crucial for making adjustments accordingly to meet children's needs. Only when learning meets children's interests will learning be meaningful for them; otherwise it will just be rote knowledge and memorization.

## Future thoughts

My study may have formally come to an end, but given my education and convictions, this is not the end of my research on children's second-language acquisition. Language learning is a long-term process, and as I teach the same children for only one school year, I understand that many of the things I do throughout the year are just like planting a seed. I can't see into the future, but I want to know how this journaling activity will influence the children in my class in the long run as they continue to learn Chinese. In the future, I hope to conduct a study of children's second-language acquisition over a longer period of time to find out more about the effectiveness of narratives.



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