

Action and Analysis on Questions in Mixed-Aged Class of Chinese as a Foreign Language in Latvia

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This paper explores several practical challenges encountered in teaching Chinese as a second language in Latvia. It focuses on common questions raised by Chinese language teachers in their daily classroom practice and curriculum design, which influence both teaching effectiveness and teachers' motivation. Through systematic analysis, the study identifies the underlying causes and outcomes of these challenges and proposes strategies to address them. The findings offer useful insights for improving classroom practice and contribute to the professional development of Chinese language teachers in similar contexts.

Keywords: international Chinese language teaching, mixed-aged class, individual differences, learning motivation, differentiated instruction, cultural introduction

1. Introduction

This study takes both the HSK intermediate class at the Faculty of Humanities, and the Beginner Chinese class, University of Latvia, as the main research sites. The classes are typical mixed-aged group, with significant differences among students in terms of age, language proficiency, learning experience, and cultural cognition.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the main teaching problems in the classrooms, the researchers conducted systematic classroom observation and documentation over a period of four weeks. The main problems were summarized from four aspects: teaching content, classroom management, learning motivation, and sense of achievement. Specifically, (1) it is difficult for teachers to meet the diverse learning needs of students; (2) overly active students are hard to manage; (3) students' learning motivation is difficult to stimulate; and (4) there is a large gap in the sense of achievement among learners.

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Therefore, the research questions are as follows:

- How should teachers in mixed-aged Chinese language classes in Latvia meet the learning needs of students of different ages and Chinese proficiency levels?
- How can teachers effectively manage overly active students, stimulate students' motivation and interest in learning Chinese, and help all students experience a sense of achievement in learning the language?

2. Literature Review

Studies on international Chinese language teaching and classroom management mainly focus on cultural perspectives, examining issues in cross-cultural contexts and proposing a range of problem-solving strategies.

Chinese language education in Latvia has undergone a transformation from “individual efforts” to “systematic development”. The initial stage (1984–2014) was characterized by single-teacher instruction led by Professor Peteris Pildegovics, while the establishment of Confucius Institutes (since 2014) marked the beginning of a stage of growth and institutional maturity (Wang Qiongzhi and Shang Quanyu 2025).

Major challenges identified in mixed-aged Chinese classrooms in Latvia: attention differentiation caused by age differences, task adaptability difficulties due to large gaps in Chinese proficiency, and behavioral misinterpretations caused by cultural differences.

3. Theoretical Foundation and Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Foundation

Research on how young learners acquire new vocabulary reveals that language learning is a multifaceted cognitive and social process, influenced by emotional engagement, meaningful context, and interaction.

In the field of educational research, Rossman and Rallis (2012) emphasize that learning in authentic contexts allows researchers and teachers to understand how meaning emerges naturally during classroom interaction. Their qualitative approach supports the present study's classroom-based design, focusing on observation, reflection, and learners' experiences rather than isolated test results.

Similarly, Suter (2012) in *Introduction to Educational Research: A Critical Thinking Approach* underlines the value of reflective, evidence-based inquiry. He argues that teachers act as researchers in their own classrooms, combining systematic data collection with critical thinking to improve teaching practice — a perspective directly relevant to this case study's mixed-method approach.

From a cognitive science standpoint, Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) in *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* highlight that effective learning connects new information to prior knowledge, and that learners construct understanding through active engagement and reflection. This aligns with the case study's emphasis on connecting Chinese vocabulary about countries and nationalities to children's real-world knowledge of geography and identity.

Language Teaching Approaches. In the field of foreign language pedagogy, Richards and Rodgers (2014) in *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* stress that communicative, task-based, and content-integrated approaches are particularly effective for young learners. These methods prioritize meaningful communication and interaction over rote memorization, enabling children to use new words purposefully — a central principle in the teaching design of this study.

Classic child language researchers such as Cameron (2001) and Pinter (2006) emphasize that young learners benefit from interactive, visual, and playful language activities. Nation (2013) further supports this view, noting that vocabulary retention depends on multiple exposures across varied contexts.

Latvian Research and Contextual Perspectives. In Latvia, local scholars have explored language acquisition from sociocultural and pedagogical perspectives. Rubene (2010) emphasizes that children learn effectively through meaningful, real-life experiences and active engagement with their environment. Tūna (2018) highlights the importance of active, meaningful, and learner-centered tasks in competency-based education, emphasizing that learning is more effective when students are purposefully engaged in authentic activities. Zariņa (2020) highlights multisensory learning—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic combinations—as essential for vocabulary development in young learners. Blūma (2015) examines teacher–student interaction as a key factor for lexical growth, while Kļava (2016) focuses on how language identity and motivation influence vocabulary learning among bilingual Latvian–Russian pupils.

Synthesis. Across both international and Latvian research traditions, several key principles emerge:

Learning through Context and Experience: Vocabulary is best acquired when integrated into meaningful, identity-related contexts (Bransford et al., 2000).

Active and Social Learning: Interaction and communication promote deeper understanding (Richards and Rodgers 2014; Blūma 2015).

Multimodal Engagement: Combining visuals, sound, movement, and play enhance memorization (Zariņa 2020; Wang and Lee 2015).

Reflective and Qualitative Inquiry: Classroom-based reflection allows continuous improvement of teaching strategies (Rossman and Rallis 2012; Suter 2012).

Emotional and Motivational Factors: Playfulness and positive emotions sustain interest in learning (Pinter 2006).

These insights collectively inform the pedagogical design of the present case study, which emphasizes interactive, meaningful, and culturally grounded vocabulary learning for young multilingual students.

3.2. Method

This study adopts an action research approach based on the classical “Four-Step” framework, which includes the cyclic processes of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. To gather data, additional methods such as classroom observations, interviews, and case studies are also employed.

Classroom observation and interview methods were employed to investigate and observe students in order to obtain first-hand data. The purpose was to identify the problems existing in international Chinese language teaching and in mixed-aged classrooms, as well as to understand students’ perspectives after teachers adopted specific teaching and classroom management strategies.

The case study method was used to describe and analyze the action research conducted by the teacher-researcher, aiming to address the aforementioned classroom and teaching issues.

4. Results

4.1. Case study 1

4.1.1. Action cycle 1

The teacher-researcher, Mr. G, a Chinese language instructor in Latvia, conducted an action research project within the Sinology program at the University of Latvia, consisting of two action cycles.

Before implementing the teaching actions, Mr. G carried out classroom observations and interviews. The participants included twelve students from the Faculty of Humanities, among them undergraduate students majoring in Chinese and one auditing doctoral student. Three participants had prior experience in learning Chinese before entering the program, six had participated in study trips to China (ranging from two weeks to one semester), and the remaining three were complete beginners. The doctoral student was not a Chinese major but had many years of Chinese learning experience and was significantly older than the undergraduate students.

Teaching content: Students with prior study or learning experience generally perceived the course content as too easy, repetitive, and lacking in challenge, whereas beginners found the difficulty appropriate. Most students expressed a desire for classroom topics to be more closely connected with social and cultural realities, believing this would enhance both practicality and engagement.

Classroom interaction: Most students realized that they were too passive in class and wished to participate more actively. Some admitted they envied peers who frequently spoke up, believing those students “learned faster.” This suggests that students had an awareness of participation but lacked sufficient confidence and linguistic support to express themselves.

Learning motivation: The majority of students’ motivation stemmed from their interest in Chinese culture, including traditional culture, films, and pop music. They generally agreed that if classroom topics were linked to their personal interests, their enthusiasm for learning would increase significantly; otherwise, motivation tended to decline. This indicates that the connection between learning content and students’ interests is key to sustaining motivation among Latvian learners.

Sense of achievement: Students commonly reported a sense of satisfaction when they observed specific progress, such as successfully remembering vocabulary that they previously forgot. However, many also felt that their overall language proficiency showed little improvement, especially in spoken Chinese, where progress seemed stagnant. This suggests that students tended to measure learning outcomes primarily by their productive performance, while neglecting the importance of receptive input. Such imbalance in self-perception may undermine sustained motivation.

In summary, the main challenge in mixed-level classes lies in the contradiction between the diversity of students’ ages and proficiency levels and their varied learning needs. Students expect teachers to take individual differences more fully into account in terms of teaching content, interaction design, and classroom structure, so as to better meet their differentiated learning requirements.

Based on the results of the preliminary classroom observations and interviews, the researcher designed and implemented a targeted teaching practice to address the identified issues, including “difficulty in balancing teaching content,” “unequal classroom interaction,” and “insufficient learning motivation.”

The theme of this teaching practice was “**Reality and Ideal.**” The primary goal was to enhance students’ language application ability and classroom participation through **semantic expansion** and **situational interaction**, while simultaneously attempting to achieve **differentiated instruction** for students of varying proficiency levels.

4.1.1.1. *Planning and Acting*

4.1.1.1.1. *Teaching Objectives and Pedagogical Rationale.*

This lesson was guided by the Communicative Approach, integrating principles from Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT). The aim was to create meaningful contexts that encourage students to use the target language in real-life communicative situations. The teacher adhered to the principle of “tiered participation and differentiated guidance,” designing tasks at different levels of difficulty to ensure both accessibility and challenge for learners of varying proficiency levels.

4.1.1.1.2. *Teaching Process Design*

Step 1: *Warm-up and Introduction*

The lesson began with a brief greeting and a light classroom warm-up activity to create a relaxed atmosphere and prepare students linguistically for the upcoming discussion.

Step 2: *Vocabulary Learning*

The teaching centered around the word “实际 (shíjì)” [reality], exploring two major semantic uses:

1. “实际上” (in fact / actually): *Students were guided to understand its correspondence with “in fact” through culturally relevant examples, such as:*
 - “所有中国人都喜欢喝热水，实际上不是。” (“All Chinese people like drinking hot water — actually, that’s not true.”)
 - “网上有人说拉脱维亚男人非常少，实际上有很多。” (“Some people online say there are very few men in Latvia — actually, there are plenty.”)
2. “理想 vs 实际” (Ideal vs Reality):

Through a role-playing activity, students simulated a job interview where they asked “HR” questions and judged whether each question reflected an ideal or realistic perspective. The teacher then led a discussion on the differences between an ideal boss and a real boss, introducing the Chinese workplace concept of “画饼” (huà bǐng – making empty promises) to help students connect language learning with social and cultural contexts.

Step 3: *Grammar Explanation and Practice*

The grammatical structure “在 + someone + 看来” (“in someone’s opinion”) was introduced and practiced through contextualized examples, e.g.,

- “在中国人看来，喝热水对身体好。” (“In Chinese people’s opinion, drinking hot water is good for health.”)
- “在外国人看来，……” (“In foreigners’ opinion, ...”).

Students practiced using open-ended sentence patterns to improve syntactic production and fluency.

Step 4: Classroom Activity

Students worked in pairs, freely choosing roles such as couples, business partners, or supervisors and subordinates, and engaged in a dialogue or debate around the theme “Ideal and Reality.” They were required to use the target vocabulary and grammatical structures learned in class to express personal opinions. After the activity, the teacher provided integrated feedback focusing on language accuracy, pronunciation, and creativity in context-building.

Step 5: Homework Assignment

Students were asked to write a short paragraph on the theme “Ideal and Reality,” consolidating the vocabulary and grammatical structures covered in class.

4.1.1.2. Observing

4.1.1.2.1. Differentiation in Teaching Content

Through the review of classroom recordings and observation notes, it was found that the teaching design effectively addressed the learning needs of students at different proficiency levels. The teacher assigned simpler reading, translation, and sentence pattern exercises to students with weaker foundations, while open-ended discussions and complex Q&A tasks were given to more advanced learners. This tiered design allowed all students to find suitable entry points for participation, preventing the marginalization of lower-level learners often observed in previous classes. As a result, the overall classroom atmosphere became more balanced and inclusive.

4.1.1.2.2. Teaching Methods and Classroom Management

The lesson integrated multiple activity formats, including role-plays, group discussions, and situational simulations, which significantly increased student engagement. Classroom recordings revealed that students who had previously been relatively silent gradually began participating in group interactions, showing a growing willingness to produce language. However, there was still room for improvement in time allocation. Some lower-level students lacked sufficient preparation time for group presentations, resulting in anxiety and incomplete performance. In future classes, the teacher could provide advance guidance or allocate more preparation time to reduce anxiety and improve the quality of student output.

In terms of classroom management, the teacher skillfully balanced responses between active and silent students, intentionally encouraging quieter learners to

speak up while maintaining an interactive atmosphere. This approach not only preserved classroom dynamism but also enhanced the sense of fairness and inclusion, helping students build a stronger sense of psychological safety and classroom belonging.

4.1.1.2.3. *Classroom Evaluation and Feedback Mechanism*

The teacher employed a diversified evaluation system, going beyond linguistic accuracy to include content expression, logical reasoning, and cultural understanding. For instance, during the discussion on “*Ideal and Reality*,” the teacher noticed that Latvian students interpreted “idealization” differently from how it is commonly understood in Chinese culture. The teacher supplemented the activity with concrete examples and cultural explanations to clarify the distinction. Moreover, evaluative language avoided explicit value judgments, thereby encouraging diverse perspectives. Such an open and inclusive feedback style is particularly vital in mixed-level classrooms, as it promotes inclusivity while strengthening students’ confidence to participate.

4.1.1.2.4. *Enhancement of Sense of Achievement and Learning Motivation*

Both classroom recordings and post-lesson feedback indicated a high level of student engagement throughout the session. Particularly in the group performance stage, students showed active preparation and enthusiasm in presenting their work. The teacher’s immediate positive feedback further reinforced their sense of self-efficacy. This demonstrates that combining task-based activities with positive reinforcement can effectively enhance mixed-level students’ sense of achievement and intrinsic motivation.

Furthermore, the inclusion of cultural elements-such as the Chinese workplace term “*huà bǐng*” (“making empty promises”) and discussions on *Chinese-Latvian cultural stereotypes*-helped students perceive the close link between language learning and real-life social contexts, thereby increasing the authenticity and relevance of their learning experience.

4.1.1.3. *Reflecting*

4.1.1.3.1. *Existing Problems and Directions for Improvement*

Although this action cycle effectively addressed several key teaching challenges, certain issues still remain.

1. **Time allocation and task complexity** need further optimization. Some students still felt underprepared during the presentation phase.

2. The implementation of **differentiated teaching strategies** is still at an exploratory stage; the teacher needs to assign task levels with greater precision and

detail in future practice.

3. The teacher's understanding and handling of **cultural differences** should become more nuanced to avoid potential misunderstandings resulting from insufficient cultural explanation.

In the next action cycle, adjustments will be made in these areas to further refine the teaching design and to explore more **inclusive and effective pedagogical strategies** for mixed-level Chinese language classrooms.

4.1.1.3.2. *Summary of Findings from Action Cycle One*

Through the implementation of the first action cycle, the researcher identified and preliminarily validated the core issues in Chinese language teaching within Latvian mixed-aged and mixed-proficiency classes. The targeted teaching practice confirmed the effectiveness of certain improvement strategies.

The results of this cycle demonstrate that:

1. **Differentiated instructional design** can, to some extent, mitigate the imbalance caused by proficiency differences among students.

2. **Varied classroom activities** and **positive evaluation** contribute significantly to stimulating students' learning motivation and sense of achievement.

3. In classroom management, teachers should maintain a balance between **active and silent students**, creating an environment that is both inclusive and respectful.

These insights lay a practical foundation for the second action cycle and offer valuable implications for the broader practice of Chinese language teaching in mixed-level international classrooms.

4.1.2. *Action cycle 2*

After completing the first action cycle, the teacher gained a deeper understanding of the current teaching situation in the HSK Intermediate Class of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Latvia. The main problems identified in the first cycle included:

(1) **Inefficient time allocation** in classroom activities, resulting in insufficient preparation time for some students;

(2) **Differentiated instruction** had been initially implemented, but the task stratification was not yet sufficiently refined;

(3) **Inadequate cultural explanation and contextual support**, which led to students' misunderstanding of certain culturally loaded expressions.

Based on these findings, the **second action cycle** focused on three major areas of improvement:

(1) Further **optimizing differentiated instructional design**,

- (2) **Enhancing the integration of cultural context** into classroom teaching, and
- (3) **Improving classroom time management.**

The chosen teaching theme was “**Both Beijing and Guilin Are Worth Visiting.**” By focusing on “travel,” a topic closely related to students’ daily experiences and rich in cultural information, the aim was to create authentic communicative contexts that would enhance students’ **spoken expression** and **cultural understanding** in Chinese.

4.1.2.1. *Planning and Acting*

4.1.2.1.1. *Teaching Philosophy and Objectives*

In this round, the teaching continued to follow the **Communicative Approach** combined with principles of **Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)**.

The teaching objectives were as follows:

- (1) To enable students to **master and use vocabulary and grammar** related to the topic of travel through lexical and grammatical instruction.
- (2) To encourage **cooperation, negotiation, and discussion** among students during task activities, thereby enhancing classroom participation.
- (3) To improve students’ **understanding of regional and cultural diversity in China** through cultural comparison activities.
- (4) To enhance students’ **sense of achievement and confidence** through differentiated task design and diversified assessment methods.

Based on the reflections from the first cycle, this round of teaching focused on **three key improvements**:

(1) Pre-task scaffolding and tiered task design. Task requirements were shared in advance via slides and worksheets, allowing students time to prepare. During activities, tasks were assigned according to proficiency levels—for example, basic-level students focused on **descriptive tasks**, while advanced students handled **analytical and comparative tasks**.

(2) Extended preparation time. Group preparation time was increased from 20 to 30 minutes. Students were encouraged to use **supporting materials** (such as pictures or maps) to strengthen expression.

(3) Enhanced cultural contextualization. During vocabulary and grammar instruction, the teacher integrated cultural elements of **Beijing** and **Guilin**, using images and videos to establish cultural connections. This helped students understand subtle semantic differences in words like “worthwhile (值得)” and “suitable (适合)” within authentic cultural contexts.

4.1.2.1.2. *Teaching Theme and Content*

The theme of this lesson was “**Both Beijing and Guilin Are Worth Visiting.**”

The teacher selected this topic for three main reasons:

(1) The topic of **travel** is universally relatable and easily stimulates student interest and personal connection.

(2) The related vocabulary reflects rich **cultural connotations**, including words like “capital (首都), Great Wall (长城), and world-renowned (天下)”.

(3) The target grammar structures “从来没.....过 (have never...)” and “从来不..... (never...)” can be naturally embedded in travel contexts, facilitating understanding and practical use.

The class lasted **90 minutes** and consisted of five stages: introduction and warm-up, vocabulary and grammar instruction, cultural input, group task activity, and presentation with feedback.

Teaching Procedures.

Step 1: Introduction and Warm-up

The teacher began by playing a short promotional video titled “Beautiful China.” Students observed the city and landscape scenes and answered guiding questions such as:

- “Which places in China have you visited?”
- “If you could travel to China, where would you most like to go?”

This step aimed to activate students’ prior knowledge and personal experiences while creating a relaxed learning atmosphere. For students who had never been to China, the teacher encouraged them to share their impressions or imaginations to lower anxiety and promote inclusion.

Step 2: Vocabulary Instruction

The teacher introduced ten core vocabulary items through tiered questioning strategies:

· 商量 (to discuss), 讨论 (to talk over) — Example: “我们周末商量去哪里玩。” (“We’re discussing where to go this weekend.”) Students practiced making their own sentences.

· 首都 (capital), 长城 (Great Wall) — With pictures of Beijing, the teacher elicited sentences such as “北京是中国的首都, 长城在北京北部。” (“Beijing is the capital of China, and the Great Wall is in the north of Beijing.”)

· 值得 (worthwhile), 桂林 (Guilin), 天下 (the world), 适合 (suitable), 确定 (decide), 肯定 (surely) — Through visual comparisons of Beijing and Guilin, students produced sentences such as “北京值得去” (“Beijing is worth visiting”), “桂林也很漂亮” (“Guilin is also beautiful”), and “桂林山水甲天下” (“The scenery of Guilin is the best under heaven”).

Lower-level students were asked to imitate and read aloud, while higher-level students engaged in sentence creation and extended expression, achieving differentiation in participation.

Step 3: Grammar Instruction and Practice

The grammatical focus included two patterns:

1. “从来没 + Verb + 过” (have never done...) — e.g., “我从来没去过桂林。” (“I have never been to Guilin.”)

2. “从来不 + Verb” (never do...) — e.g., “我从来不喝冰水。” (“I never drink cold water.”), “她从来不迟到。” (“She is never late.”)

The teacher explained that “没……过” expresses the absence of past experience, while “不……” expresses habitual negation, reinforcing understanding with examples from students’ daily lives.

Two levels of practice followed:

- Lower-level students performed pattern substitution exercises.
- Higher-level students applied the grammar structures to describe personal experiences or attitudes.

Step 4: Group Task Activity (Core Stage)

Students were divided into five mixed-level groups. Each group was tasked with planning a travel route in China and persuading others to choose their recommended city—either Beijing or Guilin.

Requirements:

- Use at least five new vocabulary items and one target grammar structure from the lesson.
- Within groups, students should “discuss” and “negotiate” to finalize their route, activities, and justifications.
- One representative from each group presented their plan and responded to questions from other groups.

Preparation time was 30 minutes. The teacher circulated during the process to offer linguistic support, guide time management, and ensure task progress. During presentations, students were encouraged to use maps and images to enhance authenticity and visual appeal.

Step 5: Presentation and Feedback

Each group presented in turn while classmates and the teacher posed questions. The teacher’s feedback focused on linguistic accuracy, logical reasoning, and cultural understanding, while maintaining a positive and encouraging tone, e.g.,

- “Your group’s expression was very natural.”
- “You used ‘值得’ and ‘从来没去过’ very well.”

In conclusion, the teacher summarized the cultural distinctions between Beijing and Guilin, emphasizing that each region has its own unique charm and guiding students to recognize that “culture has no superiority or inferiority—only differences.”

4.1.2.2. *Observing*

4.1.2.2.1. *Analysis of Classroom Recordings and Observation Notes*

Through a systematic review of classroom recordings and observation notes, the researcher identified several significant improvements in the second action cycle:

First, student participation increased noticeably. Compared with the first cycle, students in this round participated much more actively. In the group discussion stage, even previously silent students were invited by their peers to contribute. The recordings showed that almost all students had *opportunities* to speak during the preparation phase, and the overall frequency of language use increased by approximately 30% compared with the first cycle. This improvement was closely related to the teacher's pre-task scaffolding and extended preparation time, which allowed students to think and organize language with reduced anxiety.

Second, the effects of differentiated instruction became evident. During classroom activities, the teacher deliberately assigned tasks of varying difficulty based on students' proficiency levels. Advanced students were responsible for presenting and comparing, such as saying, "I think Beijing is more worth visiting because it has the Great Wall." Lower-level students focused on descriptive information, such as "Beijing is the capital of China" or "The scenery in Guilin is very beautiful." This tiered approach enabled all students to complete tasks within their ability range, preventing higher-level learners from monopolizing classroom discourse and ensuring that lower-level students had opportunities to express themselves. The recordings showed that some previously weaker students raised their hands to answer questions for the first time, indicating an increase in self-confidence.

Third, a deeper understanding of cultural context. During cultural explanation and task discussions, students demonstrated an accurate understanding of the semantic and cultural differences between words such as "*值得 (worthwhile)*" and "*适合 (suitable)*", and they used them appropriately in context. For example, one student said during a presentation:

"Beijing has many cultural activities, suitable for people who like history; Guilin's scenery is beautiful, suitable for people who love nature."

This showed that through multi-modal input (images, videos, maps), students' comprehension of culturally loaded vocabulary improved, and their language output became more contextually authentic.

Fourth, improvement in classroom atmosphere and time management. Recordings revealed that the teacher continuously adjusted the classroom rhythm, using verbal cues to help students manage time effectively. Although a few groups were still slightly rushed, most presentations were complete and well-organized. The classroom atmosphere was relaxed and engaging, with frequent laughter and lively exchanges between teacher and students. This positive learning environment

significantly enhanced students' motivation and satisfaction.

4.1.2.2.2. *Analysis of Student Interview Results*

After the class, the researcher conducted follow-up interviews with all 12 students to collect their reflections and evaluations of the second teaching cycle.

First, overall perceptions were positive. Most students described the second lesson as “more interesting” and “easier to speak in.” They found the topic relevant to daily life, the vocabulary practical, and the activity design flexible. The discussion about Beijing and Guilin helped them feel the connection between language and culture. One student commented: “Before, I was afraid of making mistakes. Now I feel relaxed during group discussions because everyone is helping each other.”

Second, the learning difficulty was more balanced. Most students felt that the difficulty level of the lesson was well-distributed—beginners no longer felt “left behind,” while advanced learners still found “room to express themselves.” The differentiated design received widespread approval. Common keywords in their feedback included “everyone had a chance to speak” and “enough preparation time.”

Third, interest in Chinese culture was stimulated. Six students reported that the lesson increased their interest in Chinese cities and culture, and several expressed a desire to travel to China in the future. One student said: “I only knew about Beijing before, but now I know Guilin is also famous. The phrase ‘桂林山水甲天下’ (‘The scenery of Guilin is the best under heaven’) is fascinating.” This surge in cultural interest demonstrates the effectiveness of integrating cultural elements into classroom instruction.

Fourth, enhanced sense of achievement. After the activities, most students felt they could use more Chinese in real communication. Some said: “I used ‘值得’ and ‘从来没去过’ several times today.” They perceived tangible language progress. Compared with the first cycle, more students mentioned that “the teacher’s feedback was very encouraging” and “I’m not afraid of making mistakes anymore.” This indicates that the positive evaluation system implemented by the teacher effectively enhanced students’ confidence and learning satisfaction.

4.1.2.3. *Reflecting*

The second action cycle achieved notable improvements in multiple aspects of teaching and learning.

First, differentiated instruction became more effective. Through pre-task planning and tiered task allocation, the teacher successfully resolved the issue of uneven task difficulty identified in the first cycle. Students at different proficiency levels were able to complete tasks appropriate to their abilities, gain a sense of

achievement, and participate more equally in classroom interaction.

Second, the integration of cultural context enhanced learning relevance. By incorporating concrete geographical and cultural materials, students' cultural awareness was broadened. The combination of language learning and cultural experience increased both authenticity and engagement in the learning process.

Third, improved time management reduced learning anxiety. Extending preparation time and providing explicit task instructions lowered students' psychological pressure and facilitated smoother collaboration. The classroom rhythm became more natural, and task completion rates improved significantly.

Fourth, the teacher's role shifted toward that of a facilitator. Instead of dominating all linguistic input, the teacher gradually took on the roles of facilitator and coordinator, encouraging students to explore autonomously and learn collaboratively. This transformation aligns with the principles of contemporary foreign language pedagogy, emphasizing learner autonomy and interaction.

However, several issues remained:

1. Some students still relied heavily on notes during presentations, and their spoken fluency and naturalness require further improvement.
2. Although the cultural content was rich, time constraints prevented deeper discussion of underlying value differences.
3. When managing multiple tasks simultaneously, the teacher needs to further improve the accuracy and immediacy of in-class feedback.

In summary, the second action cycle yielded significant results in improving classroom participation, stimulating learning motivation, and promoting cultural understanding. The findings provide practical and actionable insights for Chinese language instruction in mixed-level classrooms.

4.2. Case study 2

A second action researcher, Ms. S., a Latvian native teacher of Chinese language, conducts action research themed "Teaching Countries and Nationalities in a Beginner Chinese Class for Latvian and Russian-speaking Children of Mixed Age" during the course of Beginner Chinese class for children at University of Latvia.

4.2.1. Planning

This case study investigates how vocabulary related to countries and nationalities can be effectively introduced to children aged 8-13 learning Chinese as a foreign language in Latvia. The participants are native Latvian or Russian speakers, learning Chinese in Latvian as the language of classroom communication. The topic

“Countries and Nationalities” is culturally meaningful and encourages students to link their identity with language learning, developing early intercultural competence as well as broadening their general knowledge.

4.2.1.1. *Objectives*

To introduce vocabulary about countries and nationalities in Chinese (partly chosen by the author of this study); to evaluate pupils’ progress in vocabulary recognition, pronunciation, sentence construction and production; to identify effective teaching strategies for multilingual children of different ages with limited Chinese language exposure; to explore how learning this topic supports intercultural awareness and motivation.

4.2.1.2. *Significance of the Study*

This study is significant in several ways. Pedagogically, it expands understanding of how to adapt Chinese language instruction for young learners of different cultural backgrounds in non-Chinese environments. Practically, it provides concrete strategies that teachers can apply when designing engaging lessons. Culturally, it helps develop children's self awareness, national identity, respect for global diversity and understanding of how language reflects identity.

4.2.1.3. *Definition of Key Terms*

Country (国家 guójiā): A nation with its own territory, people, and government.

Nationality (国籍 guójí / 人 rén): The belonging of a person to a country; in Chinese often expressed as “Country + 人 (rén, person)” e.g., 中国人 Zhōngguó rén –Chinese person.

Pinyin: The Romanized phonetic transcription of Chinese characters, used for pronunciation and tone marking.

Beginner Learners: Students who are new to Chinese and learning basic vocabulary and sentence patterns.

4.2.1.4. Key Issues, Goals, and Problems

4.2.1.4.1. Key Issues

Lack of previous exposure to tonal languages; mixed-aged group with different developmental and linguistic levels; information absorption in the afternoon is not as good and effective as in the morning.

4.2.1.4.2. Goals

To make learning Chinese vocabulary interactive and engaging; to develop accurate pronunciation and use of tones, to encourage cultural curiosity and respect for different national identities.

4.2.1.4.3. Problems Identified

Confusion at times between phonetically similar country names (e.g., 英国 Yīngguó vs. 印度 Yìndù).

Limited tone retention without frequent practice.

Different attention spans, reading, writing and learning speeds within the group.

4.2.2. Acting

A task-based communicative approach was used, integrating play, visual support, and real-life interaction.

4.2.2.1. The 1st lesson

Warm-up: “World Map Puzzle” – locating and labeling countries with flags in Latvian.

Vocabulary Presentation: Writing down new words from Unit 1 Lesson 2 in “Kuaile Hanyu 1” Student’s book as well as additional country names in pinyin (Chosen by the author of the study) and sentence pattern 我是... (Wǒ shì ...) - I am.

*Guided Practice: 1) Reviewing country names by repeating them aloud
Watching the video about nationalities.*

Production: Pair work using the structures:

你是哪国人? (Nǐ shì nǎ guó rén?) – Which country are you from?

我是法国人。(Wǒ shì Fǎguó rén.) – I am French.

Reinforcement: 2 stage memory game “Countries”.

4.2.2.2. The 2nd lesson

Warm-up: Reviewing names of the countries using flag cards.

Vocabulary Presentation: Writing down questions with 吗 (ma) and negative answers using 不是 (bùshì).

你是拉脱维亚人吗? (Nǐ shì Lātuōwéiyǎ rén ma?) – Are you Latvian?
我不是拉脱维亚人。 (Wǒ bùshì Lātuōwéiyǎ rén) - I'm not Latvian.

Guided Practice: Group work using the structures:

你是拉脱维亚人吗? (Nǐ shì Lātuōwéiyǎ rén ma?) – Are you Latvian?
我是拉脱维亚人。 (Wǒ shì Lātuōwéiyǎ rén) - I'm Latvian.

我不是拉脱维亚人。 (Wǒ bùshì Lātuōwéiyǎ rén) - I'm not Latvian.

Production: Drawing country names in pinyin from the table and adding them to the corresponding flags on the board.

Reinforcement: Worksheet with countries, nationalities and language. Due to time management, this activity wasn't done in the class, but was given to the students as homework.

The topic about languages will be continued in Lesson 10, Unit 4, "Kuaile Hanyu" Book One.

4.2.3. Observing

Data Collection Tools: Teacher observation log for recording engagement and participation; Checklist assessments for recognition, pronunciation, and structure use; Student feedback at the end of lessons to gauge enjoyment and challenges.

Table 1. Results

Learning Aspect	Measurement Tool	Results Summary
Vocabulary Recognition	Flashcard test	90% of students correctly identified 8 of 9 country names (2nd class).
Pronunciation Accuracy	Teacher Evaluation	60% achieved accurate tone production (1 st class); 90% achieved accurate tone production (2nd class)
Sentence Production	Pair dialogue task	3 of 5 students could produce full, correct dialogues (1st class); all students could produce full, correct dialogues (2nd class)
Engagement & Motivation	Observation	Lower younger students' engagement during writing tasks. High engagement for all students during visual and movement tasks.

Students were particularly motivated when doing movemental activities.

4.2.4. Reflecting

Results demonstrate that multi-modal learning (visual, audio, movemental) significantly aids retention and pronunciation. The topic's cultural relevance not only encouraged participation and fostered pride in national identity, but also showed

their geographical knowledge, cultural awareness, curiosity, and social and emotional learning ability.

Pronunciation improved when tones were practiced through repetition drills, YouTube video, as well as attentive listening to teacher and the other classmates' pronunciation of the pinyin, supporting the claim by Wang & Lee (2015) that multi-modal input enhances tonal awareness.

Older students helped younger ones, fostering a cooperative learning environment, though younger learners required shorter, varied activities to sustain focus, and older students were getting bored when doing vocabulary presentation activity.

4.2.5. Results

Linguistic Outcome: Students gained command of sufficiently broad country and nationality vocabulary in this stage of learning Chinese language.

Cognitive Outcome: Learners grasped Chinese word-building logic (e.g., 中国 “central country/ nation” for China or 美国 “beautiful country” for “USA”).

Cultural Outcome: Increased awareness of national identity, pride, global diversity and curiosity about how Chinese represents different cultures.

Social Outcome: Improved student - student and student - teacher interaction and collaboration through group games.

Affective Outcome: Enhanced motivation and confidence when using Chinese to describe themselves.

4.3. Findings

The comparison and analysis of the two action research cycles demonstrate that improving teaching in mixed-aged classrooms is a dynamic and cyclical process. The implementation of strategies such as individual differentiation, differentiated instruction, interactive learning, and cultural content integration produces significant and positive learning effects.

Students' classroom participation increases substantially, and their satisfaction with the level of difficulty and content improves accordingly. The cyclical nature of action research is fully reflected in this study: through the continuous process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, both teachers' pedagogical awareness and students' learning experience are progressively enhanced and optimized.

5. Discussion

5.1. Recommendations

This study offers several **pedagogical implications** for Chinese language teaching in mixed-level classrooms:

1. Differentiated instruction as a core strategy. In heterogeneous classrooms, tiered design and diversified tasks can effectively accommodate learners at varying proficiency levels.
2. Cultural contextualization as a key motivator. The integration of cultural materials bridges language and real-life experience, thereby enhancing the relevance and meaningfulness of learning.
3. Positive feedback and diversified assessment to foster achievement. Inclusive and encouraging evaluation from the teacher strengthens students' confidence and motivates greater linguistic output.
4. Teacher as facilitator rather than lecturer. By shifting from the role of instructor to that of guide, the teacher promotes learner autonomy and collaborative learning, making the classroom more dynamic and engaging.
5. Continue multi-modal learning: Use visual, audio, and movement activities for memorization.
6. Introduce more cultural elements: Include facts, food or festivals for each country.
7. Reinforce tone practice: Use rhythmic chanting or drills to aid tonal retention.
8. Encourage home reinforcement: Provide students and parents with review materials.
9. Revisit topics: Use the same vocabulary in future grammar lessons to strengthen memory.

5.2. Limitations

This study has several limitations:

1. Limited sample size. The research was conducted with only one class, which restricts the generalization of the findings.
2. Short research duration. The study period was relatively brief, making it difficult to track students' long-term learning outcomes.
3. Researcher–teacher dual role. As the researcher also served as the classroom teacher, subjective bias may have influenced observations and interpretations.
4. Regional specificity. The study reflects the practical teaching context of Latvia, and its conclusions may not be directly applicable to other cultural or educational settings.

5.3. Further studies

Future research can be expanded in the following directions:

1. Applying mixed-level teaching strategies to online or blended learning environments to explore their adaptability in digital contexts;
2. Further examining the role of cultural differences in cross-cultural Chinese language teaching to deepen understanding of intercultural interaction and learning;
3. Establishing a sustainable feedback mechanism to continuously monitor and evaluate students' long-term language development.

6. Conclusion

Teaching vocabulary about countries and nationalities in Chinese to children in a beginner's course in Latvia demonstrates that interactive, culture-rich, and student-centered approaches significantly improve learning outcomes. By connecting linguistic learning to identity and global awareness, pupils not only acquire words but also develop curiosity and appreciation for cultural diversity. Although age difference, cultural background, learning aptitude and skills set of each student is a major challenge in mixed-aged classrooms, the findings underscore the importance of playful, meaningful, and visually supported language instruction for young multilingual learners at any age or background.

Through action research, the present study confirms the effectiveness of differentiated instruction, task-based learning, and cultural integration in teaching Chinese to mixed-aged classes in Latvia. By continuously engaging in the cycle of action research, teachers achieve a more balanced classroom interaction and enhanced students' learning motivation. It provides a practical and reliable classroom model for mixed-aged Chinese language teaching and learning within the context of Latvia.

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