

## Review of *ActiveChinese* (述评: *ActiveChinese* 网络课程系列)

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*ActiveChinese* (<http://www.activechinese.com/>) is an internet-based Chinese teaching program that integrates all four areas of language skill instruction. It targets beginning and intermediate students in elementary, middle school, high school and college, as well as professionals who may need to use Chinese. *ActiveChinese* offers programs for children, schools, professionals and travelers that can be used as independent Chinese teaching programs or as supplements to existing ones.

The children's program caters to elementary and middle school students and the theme is "The Legend of the Sacred Forest." A magic wheel rotates through 12 units, each symbolized by one of the 12 animals of the Chinese Zodiac and containing three lessons. Each lesson is divided into three parts: Teaching points, drills and games. There is an ancient map in each unit that leads students through the 36 lessons. The children's program introduces 36 key sentences and phrases, 300 vocabulary words, 100 characters, basic Chinese pronunciation and radicals. A variety of games and exercises are incorporated into the program to create an active learning environment. There is a test at the end of each unit that is presented with graphics to keep learning fun.

The school program is for high school students. There are 31 lessons. Each lesson contains a dialogue, exercises, cultural and language points and an assessment. The dialogue is available in three modes: Immersion mode, extended dialogue mode and interactive mode. The immersion mode introduces a dialogue through an audio recording with Chinese subtitles. In the extended dialogue mode, each sentence in a dialogue is slowly pronounced, with subtitles color-coded according to tone, which helps students internalize this distinctive feature of Chinese and increase their awareness of the tones. *Pinyin* and tone marks are displayed right below each word and the English meaning is shown when the cursor is pointed at the word. The interactive mode presents each sentence in a dialogue and allows students to record their pronunciation and compare it to that of a native speaker. There is also a button to turn the English or *pinyin* subtitles on and off.

The Exercise section drills pronunciation, vocabulary, listening comprehension, sentence patterns, communication skills and writing. Following the drills is a reading passage with a vocabulary list. The cultural and language points section is composed of

facts and explanations related to linguistic and social features of China and the Chinese language. The last section of each lesson is an assessment, quizzing students on the material covered in the dialogue and language points.

The school program also has a 200-level version for students who have completed the first 31 lessons or whose Chinese proficiency is at the equivalent level. There are 15 lessons in this version, which are suitable for students preparing for an AP test or college level students. In addition to the school program features, it also incorporates a Chinese idiom into the dialogue of each lesson. Each idiom is illustrated with a slide consisting of four pictures, explanations and one example sentence.

The professional program has a virtual classroom and a live tutor, which is conducted through Skype. Its 42 lessons are stratified into beginner, beginner advanced, low intermediate and business. Like the school program, each lesson contains a dialogue, language points, drills and assessment. The dialogues in the professional edition are also available in three modes. The activity format in the drill section is similar to the school edition, too, but there is an additional character writing segment. This section features animated demonstrations of radicals and stroke order. Accompanying worksheets are downloadable to reinforce character exercises.

The travel program was created for people planning to visit a Chinese-speaking country. Unlike the other editions, this travel edition is much more compact than the other three editions in terms of content and format. It is only available in CD-ROM. Dialogues are relatively simple and followed by scripts with *pinyin* underneath the characters. The language points section introduces travel tips for traveling in China. Drills focus on practical sentences. The Cultural Shocker section lists many experiences a traveler may have during their stay in China.

The most unique feature of *ActiveChinese* is its animated, interactive themes. Most of the topics cover real-life situations and reflect recent changes in Chinese society, culture and economy. Topics specifically target school students in the U.S. and are particularly beneficial to learners who plan to visit China. For example, topics such as handling an emergency, hiring a maid and buying a bicycle are very practical for professionals living and working in China. Some small-talk in the school program is pseudo-authentic. For instance, words and expressions in the Comparing Cities lesson reveal the mindset of the young Chinese working class. Cultural knowledge in this lesson focuses on how young, white-collar workers choose a place to work and how the Confucian ideal of filial piety still influences this tendency. In the Relationships lesson, the dialogue develops naturally. Expressions such as 帅呆了 (stunningly handsome), 百里挑一 (one in a hundred, cream of the crop) and 一见钟情 (fall in love at first sight) are included in a natural way. Other words introduced, such as 非诚勿扰 (if you are the one – literally, don't bother if you are not sincere) and 剩男剩女 (a single man or woman over 30 - literally a leftover man and woman) reflect up-to-date attitudes towards relationships of men and women of marrying age.

Two other unique features of *ActiveChinese* are its Chinese subtitles in the dialogues and animations of conversations. The value of textual support for listening has been supported by research comparing the effects of teaching a foreign language in visual form with or without text (Borras & Lafayete 1994, cited by Chapelle 2009). This type of pseudo-audio presentation of imitated authentic conversation of real life “provide(s) valuable modified input and resolves miscomprehension, as well as prompts noticing and deep processing.” (Chapelle 2009, p631). The vivid animated scenes paired with conversations provide pragmatically useful, context-specific language input. This input offers more dynamic communications and thus provides a better and more feasible option for listening comprehension than regular classroom instruction. This approach also makes rote exercises and drills on a computer more engaging. This feature is also extended in the drills and exercises. While the dialogue is presented in the extended mode, learners are given opportunities to notice the details of language use. The interactive mode, in which students record their own speech and compare it to the pronunciation of native speakers, not only provides an opportunity for self-correction, but also generates repairing moves when feedback is provided.

Cultural shockers, in the school program, professional program and travel program is unique. There are eight sets of vivid cartons with a total of 40 slides exposing learners to contemporary Chinese cultural issues in a fun way. After a brief introduction, an avatar narrates a series of scenarios that people from Western cultures may be surprised by when in China. Each scenario is illustrated by one slide consisted a set of four pictures and explanations. These pictures illustrate a variety of aspects of Chinese culture and a large portion focuses on Chinese dining culture. Other things that may surprise travelers are covered in the “city streets” related scenarios. This covers the potential scariness of crossing a city street and the frustration one may experience when asking for directions. The “friends” related topics deal with perceptions of friendship in China, and the “in public places” theme shows things that a Chinese person may be quite accustomed to seeing but which may seem strange to outsiders. In addition, some uncommon social customs, such as the Chinese aversion to tanning, are covered.

*ActiveChinese* is available in online and offline formats, such as CD-ROM, software, textbooks and workbooks. There are also e-flash cards in both traditional and simplified characters. It also provides a complete set of teacher’s resources, including textbooks, in-class PowerPoint slides for creative teaching activities, explanations of dialogues and language points and *pinyin* teaching guides. Other resources for teachers include written tests for each unit and lesson plans. There are also online resources for students, providing rich and engaging materials, such as *pinyin* and character help. Downloadable MP3 and MP4 files for dialogues and language points are also available. The flashcards can be personalized and allow students to review the vocabulary covered in each lesson.

It is worth pointing out that overall *Active Chinese* is a well-designed and self-contained Chinese language program. The animation dialogues are appealing to learners, interesting to watch and fun to listen to. The webpages of these dialogues are easy to navigate, repeat, rewind and skip. The dialogue design with three speeds pedagogically breaks down the learning process with respect to the principles of language acquisition.

They successfully integrate sound introduction, tone demonstration, sentence intonation, character recognition and situational scenarios and create an effective platform for teaching and learning conversational Chinese for beginning learners. The explanations of language points are well constructed. They are easy to follow and it is easy to refer back to the text. The examples included are not only taken from the text, but also are expanded to general application. The recording feature is unique compared to other similar programs. The function of allowing learners to compare their pronunciations to the standard ones is attractive and impressive. The feedback on assessments is a desirable learning tool for students.

Today, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) offers multiple instances of exposure, negation and practice in a dynamic and multifaceted way outside the classroom (Chapelle 2009). Effectively using multimedia materials to fill the motivation gap in language learning, *ActiveChinese* makes an important contribution to the field of teaching Chinese with technology. Its holistic design caters to the needs of a wide range of mainstream learners and related audiences such as educators, home-school parents, and government agencies. Overcoming the limitations of traditional textbooks and time limits of classroom teaching, *ActiveChinese* provides its users with a vast database of texts, images and sounds and integrates its website, CD-ROM, downloadable e-textbook, e-workbook, PowerPoint slideshows, MP3 and MP4 files. This makes this program stand out in the area of meeting the diverse needs of users with different learning preferences.

Currently, *ActiveChinese* is widely used by private and public schools, as well as home-schooling families in the U.S. and many international schools and institutions. Testimonials from users show that innovation is the main attraction to all users. Kids especially enjoy the 12 animated chapters and the easy-to-use drag'n'drop formats. Teachers report that students enjoy learning outside of the classroom and make faster progress than when using only traditional methods of teaching. The technical support from the company is also highly acclaimed. The *ActiveChinese* website maintains a testimonial page (<http://www.activechinese.com/testimonials.jsp>), providing potential users convincing evidence from participants.

Although student-centered communication and participation are a strength of this program, most of the communication in the program is between either the learner and the virtual tutor, or between the learner and automatically generated feedback. The provision of feedback has been one of the great challenges faced by CALL (Brett & Gonzalez-Lloret 2009). An e-learning environment would have greater potential and be more effective if it promoted interaction between users during language acquisition. With the pedagogical trend towards live communication and peer learning, instant communicative forums between learners and teachers and live discussion boards among learners have been recognized as an effective tool in online teaching and learning. Research also proves the efficacy of oral and written communication among learners (Chapelle 2009). Since the language forms are more likely to be retained through interactional written and oral activities, *ActiveChinese* could be improved upon if it provided interactive connections such as a live communication forum, instant discussion board and collaborative tasks or activities requiring teamwork between learners from around the world. We expect to see

tools such as blogs, wiki pages, live discussion boards and instant chat rooms that promote collaborative activities, participatory learning and real-time interactions not only with the teacher, but also with fellow students. Besides that, although the animations have provided pseudo-authentic scenarios, use of authentic online materials related to themes of lessons could further improve it.

This program is designed to be a comprehensive and integrated Chinese program, however, its attention to the four skills does not seem well-balanced. While oral production and Chinese character recognition skills are emphasized, writing and compositional skills are not addressed directly in any of the three main course programs. The coverage of all four skills would be more balanced if some characters and compositional writing tasks or activities could be added in the future. In addition, there is potential for the *ActiveChinese* designers to expand the exercise formats. So far there are only a limited number of exercise formats, such as multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank with given words and jig-saw puzzles, for all programs and all age learners. The e-learning package would be greatly enriched if some e-worksheet activities were also available online.

### References

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