

Analysis of the Content of the Major Free Chinese Language Learning

Websites

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Abstract:

This paper offers an analysis of the current major Chinese language learning websites with free content. It first compares the websites and highlights some of their strengths and weaknesses. Second, it offers some suggestions for their future development. The study concludes that Chinese language learning websites should provide more practical free online resources for non-native speakers to learn the Chinese language in the easiest, fast, and most efficient way.

Keywords: Chinese learning; free websites; content development of the online resources

1 Introduction

With the global promotion of the Chinese language and culture, there is increasingly more Chinese language learning content on the internet. This includes websites with free content and those with fee-based content. These websites are designed by university-based institutions, other agencies, or local communities. Each website has its own features, and understandably, each website has strengths and weaknesses. At the present time, online Chinese language learning content benefits not only foreign students but also adult foreigners interested in learning the Chinese language and culture. Therefore, online Chinese learning resources have become one of the most important means for promoting the Chinese language and culture.

To provide a better understanding of the learning content offered on the websites, this article introduces the current Chinese learning websites. It analyzes only the content offered on the websites with free content (free websites) and those with partly fee-based content (partly fee-based websites) to determine how well they can benefit learners and how they can be improved in the future.

2 Advantages and disadvantages of Chinese language learning websites

with free content

2.1 Advantages of Chinese language learning websites with free content

“Educators worldwide are developing a vast pool of educational resources on the Internet, open and free for all to use” (McGreal 2013), and “openness is not a question of production, but rather a question of access” (Downes 2013). This is a very good explanation of why free online Chinese language learning resources were chosen as the target of this

study. Online learning has become very popular for foreign language learners. The advantages for learning Chinese on websites with free content are discussed in the following paragraphs.

First, websites with free or partly free content substantially ease the financial burden for non-native Chinese language learners. Very good free online websites include Confucius Institutes Online and CCTV, which have already attracted many Chinese language learners with their free content.

The second advantage of the websites with free content is their accessibility. For university students, free online Chinese language learning content can be easily used as after-class supplementary tools to review their lessons. For part-time Chinese learners, they serve as a window on Chinese culture and society. For Chinese language teachers, they can be a resource for teaching materials. According to the survey “Ranking of Frequently Used ICT Tools” (Zhao 2012) from the Chinese Teacher Training Centre of The University of Melbourne, PowerPoint (PPT) and online language learning websites are very popular with the teachers in Chinese language classrooms.

Third, many positive comments from users have confirmed the advantages and popularity of the websites with free content. This is understandable because the sites with free and partly free content have offered very effective and practical learning materials. A very good website with partly free content is Chinesepod, whose free sections provide very useful learning materials. The site currently has more than 800,000 subscribers. This shows that a good website can attract many learners.

The abovementioned websites show that partly free content can be a choice for learners. The prerequisite, however, is that the content must be compelling and effective, and some it must be available in the free sections of the site. In addition, the website must combine online textbooks and free online teaching materials with pictures, audio, and video to improve the user experience. This would arouse interest and improve the learner’s ability to understand the content (Li and Wang 2012).

2.2 Disadvantages of Chinese language learning websites with free content

Given that this is still a relatively new phenomenon and even though these websites are popular, there is still room for further development. The first major challenge for Chinese language learning websites is the difficulty in accessing funds or gaining sponsorships and solving technical problems. The second is related to intellectual property rights, and the third is the quality of the content. Without technological and financial support, free websites are not sustainable. There are some revenue models, e.g., advertising, donations, or fees for accessing some parts of the site. The content on the websites that do not charge a fee is limited by the need to respect intellectual property rights. It is possible that some sites might have already engaged in copyright infringement. This should be avoided in the future. Additionally, as with the websites with paid content, the geographical distribution of users

and the distribution of website utilization (Yuan, MacNeill and Kraan 2012) are current weaknesses of the Chinese language learning websites with free content. The above provided the issues confronting the websites with free and partly-free content.

3 Survey of online Chinese language learning websites with free content

The first Chinese teaching website, Intermediate Chinese Course, was developed by the Chinese Language and Culture University in 1998. Since then, many universities and other non-governmental teaching organizations in China have been developing their own online teaching websites. Examples are the online Chinese courses provided by the Chinese Normal University, the Chinese as a foreign language teaching website provided by the Open University of China, and the online learning website Step Chinese provided by Zhongshan University (Wang 2011). Though many other websites provide similar or even better content, they charge fees, and this causes many learners to choose free websites instead. This article focuses on two types of free websites: those with resources provided by the big universities in China and those with resources provided by other non-governmental language teaching organizations.

3.1 Structure of Chinese university Chinese language learning websites with free content

In 2013, Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages, as a major, was offered by more than 300 universities. (Xinhua News Agency 2013). However, useful learning websites developed by the universities were rarely available to learners who were not registered, and free online websites are even rarer.

To gain a better understanding of the types of learning materials offered by the Chinese universities, the writer of this paper analyzed the websites of the 40 largest universities in China. Twenty of these are among the top 20 universities with International Chinese Education as a major, and they were evaluated by Network Science and Education Assessment China (<http://www.nseac.com/html/261/678762.html>) in 2017. The other 20 are also famous universities in various provinces and cities in China. The results are shown below.

Table 1:

Free Chinese language learning resources provided by 40 big universities in China

Item	Quantity (university)	
With Free Chinese Learning resources	30	10 universities provide Free Chinese online learning resources
		9 universities provide Chinese online learning resources to their own students only
		21 simply link to the learning resources from Confucius Institutes Online for their learning resources
Without Free Chinese Learning resources	10	

An interesting fact is that most of the 40 universities simply linked their learning resources to Confucius Institutes Online, China’s authoritative website. This is understandable because Confucius Institutes Online is the strongest website. It is well funded and has the most comprehensive teaching online resources.

Only 9 out of the 40 universities had developed their own online learning websites, but most were available to their own students and subscribers only; therefore, they are not the focus of this paper.

The other 10 universities out of the 40 had developed their own online Chinese language learning websites, however. Some of the content was free, while the content on other sites was partly free, but they were available to all learners. For the names and addresses of the 10 websites, please refer to Table 2 below:

Table 2

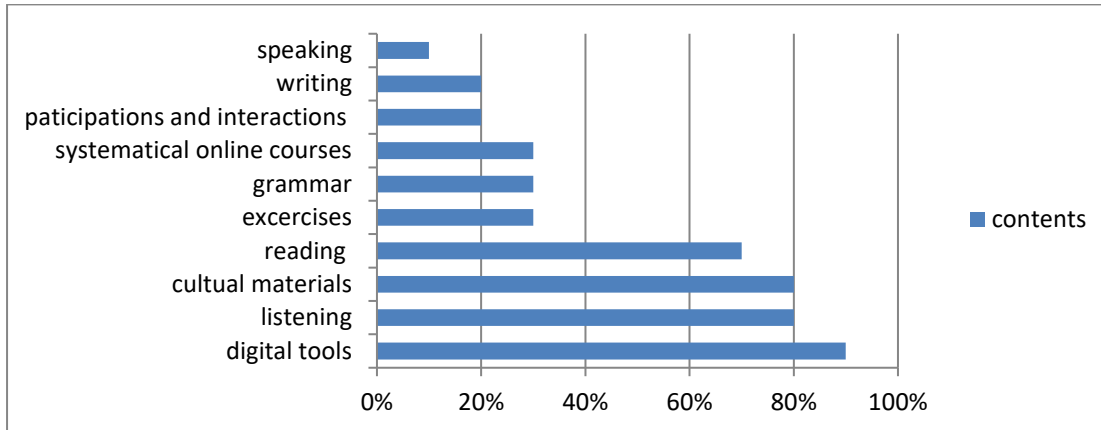
The 10 Chinese universities with free Chinese language learning resources

Name	Website address	Content
Beijing University	https://www.class-central.com/university/pku	There are 204 online Chinese learning video courses, and the courses require registration.
Beijing Language and Culture University	http://chinese.eblcu.com/ http://www.blcup.com/DicCourse	Free systematic online courses: Children’s Chinese (14hours); Chinese for Beginners (30hours); Campus Chinese 16hours); Free MICRO courses and MOOC video courses; Some reading materials, Exercises, PPT, HSK training, Chinese cultural materials, and some learning software.
The Open University of China	http://www.mychinese.com	(Yixiaoyuan) Free Chinese learning resources include listening, reading, video courses, culture courses, exercises, HSK test, digital tools, and interactive platform (“tweet me” and “eAsk”).
Fudan University Huadong University Donghua University	http://Yep.hschina.se.com/	The materials are produced jointly by three universities and School of HS Chinese. Free Chinese learning resources include: listening, reading, learning, culture courses, assistant digital tools, and interaction between organizers and learners.
Shanghai Finance and Economy university (Teaching and Resources Exploration Base of International Business Chinese)	http://businesschina.shufe.edu.cn/	Free International Business Chinese courses for beginners, intermediate and advanced level students and some videos, PPTs, and exercises and answers for learners.
Xiamen University Wuhan university	http://www.cnconfucius.com/index.html http://sie.whu.edu.cn/	There are some materials for listening, reading, writing, and grammar learning. The website requires registration.
Zhongshan University	http://www.stepsinchinese.com	There are free Chinese learning resources for beginners. (This website was not available at the moment because of technical problems)

The next chart is a comparative analysis of the specific types of content on the 10 Chinese university websites based on 10 features: writing, reading, listening, grammar, exercises, Chinese cultural materials, systematical online courses, speaking, participation and interaction, and some digital tools (dictionary/app/software/ebook/editing multimedia files).

Figure 1

Content analysis of 10 features of free Chinese language learning resources on Chinese university websites



In sum, we can see that the free online Chinese language learning resources provided by the universities are insufficient.

Very good free websites offer listening opportunities, reading materials, and culture courses. This can be seen in each of the 10 chosen websites. Examples are the website Yep!Chinese (<http://Yep.hsichinese.com/>), which was developed jointly by three universities (Fudan, Huadong, and Donghua), the school of HanSheng (HS) Chinese, and the website My EChinese (<http://www.myechinese.com>), which was created by The Open University of China.

There are some exercises which are Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) mock exams and some basic *Pinyin* practice exercises provided by eBLCU (<http://chinese.eblcu.com/>) and Yep!Chinese.

The Xiamen University and Wuhan University websites provide some grammar and writing content that may be somewhat challenging for beginners but helpful to and suitable for advanced learners and Chinese language teachers. The Open University of China also has a limited number of grammar exercises on key word usage and important sentence structures.

Only four websites provided free systematic online courses. One was the Shanghai Finance and Economy University, which was also the only one among the 10 universities with International Business Chinese courses. The other two recommendable online learning websites were offered by Beijing University and Beijing Language and Culture University (with two websites). These websites had very good free micro courses and massive open online courses (MOOCs).

Regarding participation and interaction, Yixiaoyuan (<http://www.myechinese.com>) used tactics such as group chats, Tweet Me!, and eAsk to connect learners. Yep!Chinese also offered some interactivity options for learners.

In conclusion, the Chinese exercises offered in the online systematical courses were not enough for language teaching, and the interactive and participatory learning materials were also far from sufficient. Features that needed further development included writing and speaking. It is hoped that these can be improved in the near future.

3.2 Structure of non-university teaching organization Chinese language learning websites with free content

The above survey results (Table1, Table2 and Figure1) show that the resources offered by Chinese universities were insufficient. In contrast, there were many other free Chinese language learning resources provided by non-university teaching organizations. To provide a better understanding of the state of free Chinese learning resources, this paper also selected 20 out of 80 popular online Chinese learning websites, some of which offered free content and others partly free content. Table 3 and Figure 2 in the next section show the state of the free online Chinese language learning websites offered by non-university teaching organizations.

Table 3.

Structure of non-university teaching organization Chinese language learning websites with free content

Name of Website	Website address	Content (Different letters represent different content):									
		A:Pinyin or Words and sentences		B:Character		C:Communication		D:Practical writing		E: Poems or Idioms or Stories	
		G: Interactive content offered		H: Exercises or HSK		I: Systematic online courses offered		N:Lack of content		J: Providing or linking to one of digital tools	
		(Dictionary/app/software/ebook/editing multimedia files)									
Confucius institute online	http://www.chinesecollege.com/	Writing	N	Reading	EF	Listening	AEF	Grammar	N		
		Exercise	N	Speaking	N	Systematic online course		G			
		Cultural materials		EF		Participation and Interaction:				G	
		digital tools	J	Main features: Official website with a great deal of content, including many video courses; very good teaching materials and culture content. Level: All Free website							
BBC	http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningchinese/	Writing	B	reading	ABE	Listening	AE	Grammar	A	B	
		Exercise	H	Speaking	N	Systematic online course		G			
		Cultural materials		E		Participation and Interaction:				G	
		digital tools	N	Main features: Grammar video courses, Clear explanations on grammar in English; Level: Beginner free website							
CCTV	http://english.cntv.cn/learnchinese/	Writing	N	Reading	EF	Listening	EF	Grammar	N		
		Exercise	N	Speaking	N	Systematic online course		I			
		Cultural materials		EF		Participation and Interaction:				N	
		digital tools	J	Main features: A great deal of content; Systematic online video course . Level: Free website							

Hujiang Chinese	http://cn.hujiang.com/new/p483988/	Writing	N	Reading	EF	Listening	AE	Grammar	A
		Exercise	H	Speaking	N	Systematic online course			N
		Cultural materials		E	Participation and Interaction:			N	
		digital tools	J	Main features: Good Grammar explanations; Dictation exercises ; Level: All Free website					
iMandarinPod	http://www.imandarinpod.com/hola/	Writing	N	Reading	N	Listening	EF	Grammar	N
		Exercise	H	Speaking	N	Systematic online course			I
		Cultural materials		EF	Participation and Interaction:			N	
		digital tools	N	Main features: Good free listening material; Fee-based exercises; Free downloads for special members.....Level: Intermediate/Advanced Partly free website					
Slow-Chinese	http://www.slow-chinese.com/about/	Writing	N	Reading	N	Listening	EF	Grammar	N
		Exercise	H	Speaking	N	systematic online course			N
		Cultural materials		EF	Participation and Interaction			N	
		digital tools	N	Main features: Good Listening learning material; Fee-based exercises; Level: All Partly free website					
ChineseClass 101	https://www.youtube.com/user/chinese101/feature	Writing	B	Reading	EF	Listening	AE	Grammar	A
		Exercise	H	Speaking	N	Systematic online course			I
		Cultural materials		E	Participation and Interaction:			N	
		digital tools	N	Main features: Good video courses; Good Listening learning video exercise; Level: All Free website					
ChinesePod	https://classroom.chinesepod.com/about	Writing	N	Reading	N	Listening	AE	Grammar	A
		Exercise	N	Speaking	N	Systematic online course			I
		Cultural materials		E	Participation and Interaction:			G	
		digital tools	J	Main features: Lessons (free. sign up) fee-paid downloadable content; Explanation in English for beginners; Level: All Free website					
Popup Chinese	http://www.popupchinese.com/podcasts	Writing	N	Reading	N	Listening	AE	Grammar	A
		Exercise	H	Speaking	N	systematic online course			I
		Cultural materials		EF	participation and Interaction:			G	
		digital tools	J	Main features: Very good Participation and Interactivity in Community Forum and popular writing pad. Level: all Free website					
Yoyo Chinese	https://www.yoyochinese.com/	Writing	N	Reading	N	Listening	AE	Grammar	A
		Exercise	N	Speaking	N	systematical online course			I
		Cultural materials		EF	Participation and Interaction:			G	
		digital tools	N	Main features: Good video courses; Good grammar courses explained in English from non-native speaker's perspective; Good Blog with a lot of learning materials. Level: all Partly free website					
Flow Chinese	http://www.flowchinese.com/	Writing	BD	Reading	E	Listening	AE	Gramm ar	A
		Exercise	N	Speaking	N	Systematic online course			I
		Cultural materials		EF	Participation and Interaction:			N	
		digital tools	J	Main features: Different level courses in listening, reading, speaking, and grammar; especially good practical writing.					

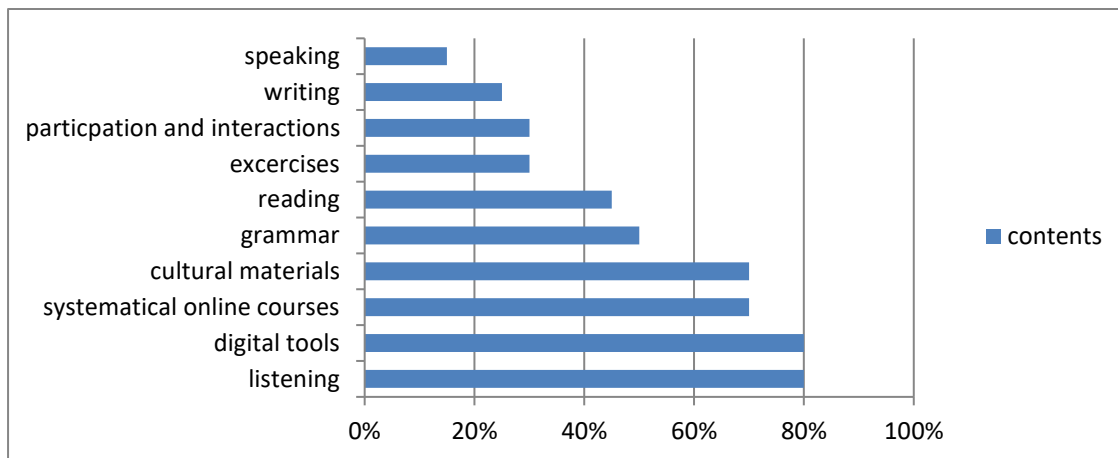
				Level: all		Partly free website				
Clear Chinese	http://www.clearnchinese.com/chinese-links/chinese-websites.htm	Writing	B	Reading	N	Listening	AEF	Gramm ar	A	
		Exercise	AB	Speaking	N	Systematic online course				I
		Cultural materials		EF	Participation and Interactivity:					N
		digital tools	J	Main features: :Chinese-English dictionary, 15 free Chinese courses, Chinese writing (Characters), listening lessons, grammar (links to the Yoyochinese website) Level: All Partly free website						
The Chairman Bao	http://www.thechairmansbao.com/	Writing	N	Reading	EF	Listening	EF	Gramm ar	A	
		Exercise	N	Speaking	N	Systematic online course				N
		Cultural materials		EF	Participation and Interaction:					N
		digital tools	J	Main features: Good reading and grammar learning Level: Intermediate/advanced Partly free website						
Remember Chinese	https://chinese.remembr.it/lessons	Writing	N	Reading	N	Listening	AE	Gramm ar	N	
		Exercise	H	Speaking	N	Systematic online course				I
		Cultural materials		E	Participation and Interaction:					N
		digital tools	J	Main features: Free online courses: 55 lessons divided into 9 modules focused on various aspects of daily life. In addition to the lessons, there are very comprehensive drills Level: all Partly free website						
Speak Chinese	http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/Lesson/195850.htm	Writing	B	Reading	E	Listening	N	Gramm ar	N	
		Exercise	N	Speaking	N	Systematical online course				N
		Cultural materials		EF	Participation and Interactions					N
		digital tools	J	Main features: Good reading practice and 47 courses and some idioms, poems Level: all Free website						
AllSet Learning	https://resources.allsetlearning.com/	Writing	N	Reading	N	Listening	A	Gramm ar	A	
		Exercise	N	Speaking	N	Systematic online course				N
		Cultural materials		N	Participation and Interaction:					N
		digital tools	J	Main features: Chinese Pronunciation Wiki and Chinese GrammarWiki; Explanation grammar(1,789 articles) Level: all Free website						
Seagull	http://seagull-tandem.eu/putonghua/portfolio/chinese-b2-2/	Writing	D	Reading	N	Listening	N	Gramm ar	N	
		Exercise	H	Speaking	C	Systematic online course				I
		Cultural materials		EF	Participation and :					N
		digital tools	J	Main features: Some courses and very good oral practice for learners by connecting language partners. Level: all Free website						
Pinyin Practice	http://pinyinpractice.com/wangzhi/	Writing	N	Reading	N	Listening	NO	Gramm ar	N	
		Exercise	N	Speaking	A	Systematic online course				I
		Cultural materials		N	Participation and Interaction:					G
		digital tools	J	Main features: Good for Pinyin Learning Level: Beginner Free website						

Chinese multimedia	http://www.ctcfl.org.uk/Chinese/index.html	Writing	B	Reading	N	Listening	AE	Grammar	A
		Exercise	H	Speaking	N	Systematic online course			I
		Cultural materials		N		Participation and Interaction:			N
		digital tools	J	Main features: : Writing resources focused on Chinese characters; Good grammar exercises; 22 Free systematical online courses Level: Elementary/Intermediate Free website					
DigMandarin	http://www.digmandarin.com/	Writing	N	Reading	N	Listening	A	Grammar	A
		Exercise	N	Speaking	N	Systematic online course			N
		Cultural materials		EF		Participation and Interaction:			G
		digital tools	J	Main features: There are some tips for learning Chinese and some good video courses. The systematical online courses are partly free; Good participation and interaction on the forum.					

This survey focused on the same 10 website features as the first survey of the university sites, the results of which, based on Table 3, can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2.

Content analysis of free Chinese language learning resources on non university teaching organization websites



Judging from the classifications, 90% of the 11 free websites and the 9 partly free websites in the survey were comprehensive, and others, such as iMandarinPod and Slow Chinese focused on just one aspect of language learning. These two websites both focused mainly on listening practice. The *Pinyin* website was the only specialized website.

From Figure 2, it can be seen that most resources focused on listening, cultural elements, and a small number of online teaching courses.

Apart from iMandarinPod and Slow Chinese, which provided listening practice, the remainders of the websites had only some audio and video listening materials but were focused on teaching *pinyin* and Chinese characters.

Regarding special features, these varied by website. For example, the Confucius

Institute Online provided many learning materials, and ChinesePod has many practical courses.

Learners could find many websites offering free systematic courses. For example, the CCTV, Seagull, and ChineseClass 101 websites offer courses for different levels of students.

About grammar learning materials, AllSet Learning, Yoyo Chinese, and ChinesePod would be good choices. A particular feature of ChinesePod and Yoyo Chinese is grammar video courses in English, in which teachers explain grammar issues from a non-native speaker’s perspective.

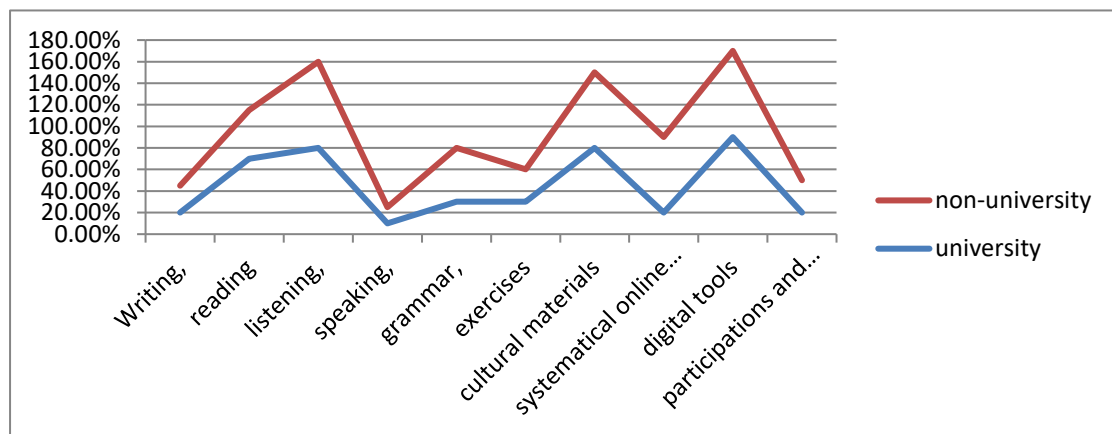
The three websites Popup Chinese, “Yoyo Chinese, and ChinesePod had very positive feedback from many learners because they offered learners opportunities for effective interactions with other learners to solve problems.

In sum, almost half of the free websites had reading resources with unique features, but grammar and related exercises were rarely covered. The least mentioned features were writing and speaking.

3.3 Summary of the content analysis of the websites

Figure 3

Content analysis of the non-university and university websites \



In general, the two types of free Chinese learning websites had some similarities regarding the above 10 features, and all the websites highlight their own featured items, listening, culture, and learning materials. More than half of the websites offered reading materials, but grammar and related exercises were rarely covered. The least mentioned features were writing and speaking. For systematic online courses, the websites of non-university teaching organizations offered more resources than the university websites. There were more active participation and interaction opportunities on the websites of non-university teaching organizations.

The obvious reason for the inadequacies of the free Chinese university learning websites is that most universities focus on classroom teaching rather than providing enough learning content on their websites. However, “for some universities free sharing of learning

resources might be a strategy to create a competitive advantage by using unorthodox methods” (Hylén 2006). For example, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has launched an OpenCourseWare online program, which provides “a free and open educational resource for faculty, students and self-learners around the world.” Some other universities in the United States have free online Chinese language learning resources as well. Further discussion related to this will be presented in the last section of this article.

Based on the survey results of shown above (Table2 and Table3), some aspects of the free content on the Chinese language learning websites need to be improved. This includes daily practical writing resources, oral communication practice materials, and some grammar learning materials for non-native speakers.

4 Survey of Finnish students’ needs from online Chinese language courses:

A case study

The Finnish University Network for Asian Studies surveyed 42 students from Finland about their needs for the contents of their online Chinese courses. The participants’ opinions on listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar resources were gathered. The survey was conducted in Finland and represented students in Finland only. Only some aspects of the survey were chosen for discussion in this paper. However, the results of this survey still offer a good guide regarding the content on free Chinese learning websites. The following are some representative excerpts from this survey. (Table 4 and Table 5 were provided by the Finnish University Network for Asian Studies) .

Table 4

Which type of exercise would you need most for Chinese courses network

1 = least, 5 = most	Grammar	Reading	Listening	Writing	Speaking
0 = no answer	4	6	7	4	2
1	15	5	1	10	2
2	11	6	6	11	2
3	4	15	7	9	3
4	2	7	12	6	11
5	6	3	9	2	22
Total	42	42	42	42	42

Source: Finnish University Network for Asian Studies

Table 5

The excerpt of students' representative needs for Chinese courses network

I would need courses on the following level	What specific wishes would you have for future online Chinese language courses?
Intermediate level	I have never studied Chinese, but my advanced Japanese level skills often help me to get a general Intermediate level idea of simple Chinese texts, so reading is a somewhat less urgent issue. Speaking in Chinese (recognizing the tones and knowing the Intermediate level pronunciation for each character) and understanding the spoken language even a little would be a skill I would love to have.
Intermediate level	More interactive activities.
Advanced level	I've taken Chinese courses before but they mostly focused on Grammar, so now I'd want some courses that help with communicative skills & critical reading skill.
Advanced level	Plenty of practical writing exercises and listening comprehension!
Advanced level	I also coordinate a project called Yanzu - Chinese language in Upper Secondary Schools. One of our goals is to create online material for Basic Chinese courses for high school students. However, we do not have a technical solution to this, the existing online tools are quite inflexible, and it is challenging to use them in a way that meets the requirements of the new teaching guidelines (OPS), for example interactivity, focus on communication and courage to use even scarce language skills, phenomenon based learning and so forth. If you have found a working solution for your (future?) online material, I am eager to hear more about it.
Elementary level, Intermediate level	Several smaller courses specific to some areas!
Elementary level	. Lectures and practices from native speakers. Speaking, reading and writing in a home exam and in assessments. grammar is also important even though I placed it as least needed
Elementary level, Intermediate level	Online courses could focus on specific areas, like traveling, spoken language, every day phrases etc.
Elementary level	Focus on understanding not on Chinese characters.
Intermediate level, Advanced level	As lecture time is limited, it should focus on only issues that are difficult to learn from materials, such as grammar, writing style, and colloquial speech patterns.

Source: Finnish University Network for Asian Studies, Turku University

The students listed, in order of preference, the types of exercises they needed most. This gives us a hint of the types of exercises that are most/least needed. Students wanted speaking exercises the most, but exercises of this type are the most difficult to arrange online. Some advanced students needed materials for improving their writing skills. Grammar teaching was also important even though some students placed it as the least needed. It is evident that clear and effective online grammar courses are needed as well.

5 Reflection on the current structure of free online Chinese learning

resources

Free online teaching can attract more learners by offering beneficial content. Based on the analysis above, this paper offers some suggestions for the future development of free online Chinese learning resources.

(1) Chinese universities should make more efforts to strengthen their free online resources to cater to an increasing number of Chinese language learners.

It is well known that Chinese universities have excellent teachers and are well supported in terms of funding and technology. By providing fascinating and practical free online learning materials, they can easily achieve dual success in online and classroom teaching. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2007, more than 3,000 open access courses (open courseware) are currently available from more than 300 universities worldwide. In China, 750 courses have been made available by 222 university members of the China Open Resources for Education (CORE) consortium (Li Yuan, MacNeill and Wilbert Kraan 2017). But Chinese learning resources developed by universities are still not widely available. Only 10 universities provide these resources, so the Chinese government and the universities should propose new education ideas, development platforms, integrate multiple learning resources, and provide incentive policy. (Chao, 2012).

(2) Experts should develop more practical and effective cultural learning materials.

The ultimate goal of Chinese language teaching is to enable students to gain a comprehensive command of the language so that they can use it effectively. Thus, the guiding principle should be “to get the beginners to learn and command the language in the quickest and best way in the shortest time, and digitalized online teaching can not deviate [sic] this either” (Lu 2012). The current study shows that most of the cultural resources are too difficult for beginners and thus cannot produce very good results. It is therefore necessary that interesting, practical, effective, and efficient culture-related online materials be developed to replace the current focus on the introduction to the culture.

(3) Practical writing materials and related exercises are needed on the free websites.

Most of the websites focus more on writing Chinese characters writing rather than on writing practical articles. For intermediate and advanced students, practical writing materials are important because they are closely related to the activities of daily life, such as writing emails, meeting notices, and asking for help. It is crucial that Chinese learning materials really permeate the learner's daily life. Flow Chinese is a very good website that provides practical writing materials. Another way to design effective writing materials is to develop exercises based on texts. Seagull provided some guided rewriting exercises after each text. This allows the learners to paraphrase the text by using some of the words and sentence

structures they learned from it.

Additionally, designing participatory and interactive writing platforms with opportunities for learners' articles to be corrected by native speakers would be beneficial. This can be done on the Chinese learning websites with free content. It provides opportunities to develop writing materials.

(4) Free online speaking resources are needed.

There were few resources for learning to speak Chinese. Most speaking materials on the websites were designed to teaching *pinyin* and the pronunciation of Chinese characters only. This clearly cannot meet learners' needs for real-world communication. Some fee-based websites provide one-on-one interactive Chinese language courses, but this is difficult for websites offering free content. Seagull has provided a good example of an alternative approach. It offered oral speaking practice by pairing language partners. The website also had very specific step-by-step instructions not only to guide learners to find appropriate language partners but also to help them to communicate effectively.

(5) More grammar resources from the perspective of non-native speakers need to be developed on the websites with free content.

Grammar is one of the most challenging aspects of language learning, and it is also one of the main reasons why learners tend to give up on learning a new language. To conquer this challenge, learners must be provided with practical yet compelling content so that they will not become frustrated and quit. Most non-university teaching organization websites with free content did not have enough good grammar learning materials to attract students. There were some grammar learning materials on the websites offered by universities, but they are aimed mostly at Chinese language teachers and advanced level students. So far, two websites—ChinesePod and Yoyo Chinese—provided good grammar learning materials tailored to non-native speakers.

6 Conclusion

In sum, free Chinese language learning websites that offer free content are different in their diversity of content and formats from those that charge a fee. Their development is limited by a shortage of funding and sponsorships. This paper offers some suggestions for improving the content of the websites in terms of cultural, writing, speaking, grammar, and other teaching materials. The current study also calls for more universities to develop Chinese language learning websites with free content. It is our strong belief that the construction and development of free online teaching materials will play a positive role in improving the language level of non-native learners. It will also facilitate the dissemination and exchange of Chinese culture. This paper is an important step in analyzing websites targeted at Chinese language learners, however, further research is needed in this regard.

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