Dual language immersion (DLI) programs are rapidly increasing in popularity around the nation. In the past six years, Utah’s DLI programs have increased from zero to 33 and the number continues to grow. These programs provide K-12 students with instruction taught partly in English and partly in another language. Professor Ko-Yin Sung is a second language acquisition researcher who focuses on teaching and learning of Chinese as a second language. Professor Sung noticed that the current research is not keeping up with the rapid expansion of these programs. It also focuses primarily on Spanish as a second language, however the practices for teaching Spanish may not always transfer over to other languages, such as Mandarin Chinese. The reason is that Mandarin Chinese, as well as other tonal languages, are systematically different from alphabetical languages, such as Spanish and English.

For the past 3 years, Professor Sung has worked with a former Master of Second Language Teaching (MSLT) student, Hsiao-Mei Tsai, to research Utah’s Mandarin Chinese dual language immersion programs. The research focuses on teaching and learning within these programs to help us better understand how to improve second language learning. In June 2019, Professor Sung published the book, Mandarin Chinese Dual Language Immersion Programs to help fill the gap in the current research. The book has two main parts that discuss Chinese DLI programs with a focus on Utah’s model. The first part of the book focuses on three groups: parents, teachers, and administration. It looks at teacher to teacher and teacher to parent communication as well as “how teachers position themselves in teaching through their teacher identities” to determine the perception each group has towards the Utah model and how “they build a supportive DLI classroom.” The second part of the book focuses on classroom research. It provides information about “teaching and learning strategies, corrective feedback and learner uptake and repair, translanguaging in authentic teacher-student interaction, and Chinese-character teaching.”

The book was published by the highly-respected and leading publisher in the language education field, Multilingual Matters. It is part of their Bilingual Education and Bilingualism series, whose editors, Nancy H. Hornberger and Wayne Wright, are internationally known for their work in this field. The book was also the first to focus on DLI programs involving a non-alphabetical language and has been published in both Chinese and English. Professor Sung notes that the book not only provides benefits in the United States but can be used worldwide to help improve other language learning programs.

Professor Sung uses her research to help improve her classes at Utah State University. Chunking is a strategy used to remember things, usually numbers. Professor Sung uses it to help her students learn and remember characters. They can decompose a character into smaller parts called chunks. Characters usually have fewer than 5 chunks so it makes it easier to remember each chunk than trying to remember each stroke on its own. Professor Sung has found success using the chunking method with elementary students and has transferred it to her college students.

Professor Sung also loves to implement activities in her classroom. She believes that it is just as important for students to practice the language verbally and through writing as it is for them to practice grammar and vocabulary. She creates activities that require students to verbally communicate to help each other find the answers to the activity. This helps ensure that students are practicing speaking and listening to the language.

Professor Sung loves doing research and focuses on finding more effective ways to learn, making it easier to teach second languages. She spends about half of her time at work researching and the other half teaching. She mainly focuses on conducting research during the school year and has a research assistant to help her gather data. She writes in the summer. As the Chinese program at USU expands, she believes that her “research will really help this program to grow and go in the right direction.”
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By Annie Hayes