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Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Language through Cultural Context

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Abstract

Culture plays an important role in foreign language (FL) teaching and learning and is one of the key standards in world language education according to the ACTFL World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). However, many Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) teachers face the challenge of integrating cultural learning into the regular curriculum. This study employed a mixed-methods approach and conducted an online survey, the Instructor Perception Questionnaire, which consisted of a 7-point Likert scale, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions. The survey examined teachers' perceptions and interests, future willingness to incorporate culture, confidence levels, preparation time, and textbook usage. A total of 260 CFL teachers participated in the survey. The purpose of the study was to investigate CFL teachers' perceptions of teaching Chinese through cultural context and to explore their reflections on improving the CFL teaching and learning environment. The results indicate that with culture-integrated language teaching in Chinese classrooms, students not only develop linguistic and cultural competence but also demonstrate improved interpersonal communication skills. CFL teachers can start to immerse students in cultural context, although they are still at the novice or beginning level and to engage them in more cultural activities inside or outside the classroom, connecting to other standards of 5Cs.

Keywords*: Culture-integrated language teaching, Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), Teacher perceptions, Cultural context in language learning*

1. Literature Review

I. Culture as one of the most important standards in Foreign Language (FL) education.

Culture is one of the most important components of World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages [9]. To help students gain cultural competence, CFL teachers should not only teach cultural products, practices (what they do), and perspectives (how they do it) to students but instruct them to use or apply the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationships among the products, practices, and perspectives (the cultural 3 Ps) of the target language [11]. In addition, FL learners need to learn how to apply the cultural competence with their linguistic skills when having a real-world conversation with (native) Chinese speakers [5]. Culture and communication cannot be separated. The way a person communicates is influenced by their culture, as the meanings of words, the significance of gestures, and the rules of social interaction are defined differently across cultures. Culture may influence how a person communicates as a sender or a receiver. For example, a person encodes a message using an assumption from his or her culture while the audience decodes the message according to the assumption of the audience's culture. The greater the difference between cultures, the greater the chance for misunderstanding, thus making cultural learning extremely important in language learning (Bovee & Thill, 2016, pgs. 65-66) [2].

II. "Contextualized" is essential in language and culture learning.

All levels of social interaction are influenced by the three levels (linguistic, cultural, and situational); these three may influence each other and should be taught explicitly in foreign language classrooms [3]. Linguistically, contextualized learning contains vocabulary, grammar, and real-world functions, including its lexical categories, sentence structures, patterns of discourse, and communicative functions. Culturally, culture itself is an important part of the context in communication, and cultural context is embedded in the language. Situationally, culture is a pervasive part of the learning environment and can be observed in

specific situations or for special purposes [4] [7]. CFL teachers need to provide students with authentic written and spoken texts, as well as cultural contexts, and connect them with the target culture within a contextualized language learning environment beyond the traditional language classroom [6] [8].

III. Applying Vygotsky's sociocultural theory into linguistic and cultural development.

Vygotsky's theory (1978) has been discussed a lot in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and second language learning (SLL) [10] [14]. As Vygotsky (1978) said, "Language is a cultural tool – it helps people learn how to function within a culture." To help students reach their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), CFL teachers must scaffold students' learning and teach them how to make meaning in context and communicate in culturally appropriate ways. This approach helps minimize cross-cultural misunderstandings while developing students' linguistic competence, cultural competence, interpersonal communication skills, and intercultural competence. Gaining both cultural and linguistic competences does not conflict, and both can benefit each other.

2. Methodology

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research is based on ACTFL Core Practices [9]:

(1) Use authentic cultural resources: Yu (2009) stated that "as long as the materials create a story that is contextually and culturally feasible, they can be viewed as authentic texts" [13]. Figure 1 provides an example of how CFL teachers can integrate culture into language instruction. Using this menu, students can learn vocabulary related to ordering drinks and practice the sentence structure "我想点…… (Wǒ xiǎng diǎn…)," meaning "I would like to order…."



Figure 1. Boba Tea Menu

(2) Design communicative activities: Beebe and Cummings (1985) stated that "a cross-cultural and interlanguage task should contain highly effective means of creating semantic formulas... [and] for a culturally appropriate response that will occur in natural speech, and learners may gain insight into social and psychological factors that will affect their speech performance. [1]" For example,

instructors can design and implement interpersonal communication tasks for pairs, small groups, and the whole class. They can also create meaning-making activities that encourage students to engage in deeper language processing by generating contextual information to initiate and sustain conversations. Figure 2 presents a real-life dialogue that students can use in role-play or think-pair-share activities.

店员(diàn yuan, staff)：**请 问 你 要 喝 （点） 什么？** What do you want to drink?

qǐng wèn nǐ yào hē（diǎn ）shí me ？

客人(kè rén, customer)：**芋 头 奶 茶**。 Taro milk tea.

yù tóu nǎi chá

店员：**请 问 你 要 什么 size**? What size do you want?

qǐng wèn nǐ yào shíme size ?

客人：**大杯。** Large.

dà bēi

店员：**加 什么 料 吗?** Any topping?

jiā shíme liào ma?

客人：**珍珠**。 Boba.

zhēn zhū

店员：**甜度, 冰块？** How much sugar and ice?

tián dù, bīng kuài

客人：**去冰, 半糖**。 I would like no ice and half sugar.

qù bīng, bàn táng

店员：**几杯？** How many?

jǐ bēi

客人: **两杯**。Two。

liǎng bēi

(Waiting for a few minutes….)

店员：**你的 两 杯 大 杯 芋 头 奶 茶 加 珍 珠, 去冰 半糖 好了。**

nǐ de liǎng bēi dà bēi yù tóu nǎi chá jiā zhēn zhū , qù bīng bàn táng hǎo le。

Your two large taro milk tea with boba, no ice and half sugar are here.

客人: 谢谢！ Thank you! xiè xiè

Excerpted from: two Chinese native speakers at Love Tea in Pittsburgh.

Figure 2. Real-Life Dialog

(3) Immerse in the target language and culture: Many L2 language learners are stagnant in the language they studied because of L1 (such as English) interference, lack of cultural knowledge, and restricted textbook knowledge. For example, when teaching students how to perform the speech act of ordering drinks at a bubble tea shop using the phrase "去冰少糖" (qù bīng shǎo táng), instructors must also help students understand the cultural concepts underlying the utterance (see Table 1). Students need to understand why and how the "scripts" for ordering drinks differ between Chinese and American cultures while also developing an awareness of Chinese food culture.

Table 1. Cultural 3P's of Boba Tea

Cultural Products (such as food, clothes….)	**Cultural Practices** (What people do?)	**Cultural Perspectives** (How people think? such as value, attitude….)
Boba milk tea • is originally from Taichung, Taiwan. • becomes a signature flavor itself like cookies, pineapple cakes…., etc., and can be found in Asian supermarkets.	**In Taiwan**—it's more like street food.   **In the U.S.**—it's more like a café. Free space for friends to chat together.	Asian people have a different palette from Americans. For example, when choosing drinks, Asians tend to have very specific requirements when it comes to the ice and sugar levels.

2.2. Research Questions

Previous studies have shown that most CFL teachers recognize the importance of integrating culture into Chinese lessons, yet the majority still do not do so extensively due to constraints imposed by the regular curriculum. In addition, there is limited research surveying a large number of CFL teachers' perceptions of teaching language through cultural context and how they reflect on students' linguistic and cultural competence through culture-integrated language teaching. Thus, in this paper, I explore the following research questions:

- What are CFL teachers' perceptions of teaching Chinese through cultural context, including teacher confidence, preparation time, textbook usage, and student performance?
- How do CFL teachers' reflections on culture-integrated language teaching, regarding students' interpersonal communication skills and intercultural competence?
- What impact does culture-integrated language teaching benefit in Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) Education?

3. Data Collection

The online questionnaire was administered through Google Forms from April 7 to April 14. It was posted in a Facebook group for CFL teachers with 24,100 members. The study employed a mixed-methods approach [12].

3.1. Instrument

Instructor Perception Survey: using a 7-Point Likert Scale Questionnaire (see Appendix I). The online survey can be completed in 10-15 minutes. The 7-Point Likert Scale online questionnaire was used (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = moderately disagree, 3 = slightly disagree, 4 = neutral, 5 = slightly agree, 6= moderately agree,

7= strongly agree). In addition to these 7-point Likert scale items, the survey included three multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions that teacher participants could answer in either English or Chinese.

3.2. Measurement

Including the following categories:

- **Closed-ended questions**

(1) Instructors' perception of teaching Chinese through culture **(perception)**
(2) Instructors' confidence in teaching Chinese through culture **(confidence)**
(3) Instructors' time for preparing cultural materials **(time)**
(4) Instructors' usage of traditional textbooks (word and grammar-based) instruction **(usage)**
(5) Instructors' willingness to integrate cultural context in Chinese class **(future wiliness)**

- **Multiple-Choice questions**

(6) The language used in the culture class **(language used)**
(7) Teachers' perception of students' language performance in the culture class **(observe students' language performance)**

- **Open-ended questions**

(8) **Most-commonly taught cultural topics**
(9) Instructors' feedback about teaching Chinese through culture **(feedback)**

3.3. Participants

A total of 260 CFL teachers participated in this online survey, from the U.S., Canada, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Australia, Germany, U.K., India, Turkey, Czech, Greece, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Belize, South Africa, and Nevis. Most teachers are Chinese native speakers (97.7%). The demographic information is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic background of participants (n =260).

Demographic variables	Number of respondents	Percentage %
Position		
President/Principal	6	2.3
Instructor	228	87.7
Teaching Assistant	6	2.3
Intern	11	4.2
Other (Staff….)	9	3.5
Age		
20~30	67	25.9
31~40	80	30.9
41~50	73	28.2
51~60	36	13.9
Other	3	1.1
Years of Teaching Chinese		
0~1 year	25	9.6
1~3 years	57	21.9
3~5 years	48	18.5
5~10 year	67	25.8
>10 years	63	24.2
Teacher's Native Language		
Chinese	254	97.7
English	1	0.4
Other	5	1.9
Teacher's Family Languages		
Chinese	239	91.9
Taiwanese	78	30

Cantonese	8	3.1
English	62	23.8
Other	22	8.5
Number of Languages Spoken		
1	1	0.4
2	80	30.8
3	117	45
≥ 4	62	23.8
Levels of Students Taught		
Novice	121	46.5
Beginning	183	70.4
Intermediate	147	56.5
Advance	52	20
Ages of Students Taught		
Preschool: 3-5 years old	40	15.4
Grade schooler: 5-12 years old	137	52.7
Teen: 12-18 years old	117	45
Young adult: 18-21 years old	72	27.7
Adult: > 21 years old	88	33.8

Note. One participant did not respond to the "age" question; percentages were calculated based on the total number of respondents.

4. Data Analysis

CFL teachers consider that culture-integrated language teaching in Chinese class is interesting (**perception and interest, 97%**) and would like to integrate cultural context into their regular Chinese class and discuss more culturally related topics (**future willingness, 93%**). Instructors' confidence (**confidence, 86%**) may not be the main reason that causes culture class to be less emphasized in the regular class curriculum. Spending extra time (**preparation time, 62%**) to prepare extensive materials seems like a workload for some instructors, and some teachers consider that getting used to teaching Chinese through traditional textbooks may restrict their consideration of teaching culture in class (**textbook usage, 40%**) (see Chart 1). Therefore, most CFL teachers strongly agree that teaching Chinese through culture is valuable and can improve language learning (very high averages ~6.3–6.7). However, there is still reliance on traditional grammar- or textbook-based instruction, and time constraint is a major barrier

In addition, based on the pie charts (see Figure 3, 4, and 5), CFL teachers believe that culture enhances interpersonal communication. However, students' language performance in cultural lessons is more varied (with average scores ranging from approximately 3.9 to 4.8). This suggests that CFL teachers perceive students' language and culture competence (what they know) to be stronger than their language and culture performance (what they can do in the classroom). Although students' language use varies, cultural contexts can support real-life and immediate communication skills. This suggests that students may perform better when engaging in real-life dialogues, thereby improving their language and culture proficiency.

(1)Teachers' perceptions of teaching Chinese through culture (perceptions)

(1.1) I am very **interested** in introducing culture to my students and broadening their eyes to see the world.

	Disagree (1~3)	Neutral (4)	Agree (5~7)	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Average
Respondents	3/259 (1.2%)	3/259 (1.2%)	253/259 (97.6%)	3	7	7	6.7

(1.2) I consider teaching Chinese through culture is **a good way** for students to learn the language.

	Disagree (1~3)	Neutral (4)	Agree (5~7)	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Average
Respondents	2/260 (0.8%)	11/260 (4.2%)	247/260 (95%)	2	7	7	6.3

(1.3) I think it is **worthwhile** to prepare extensive cultural materials for students to learn because this is how language is used in a real-life situation.

	Disagree (1~3)	Neutral (4)	Agree (5~7)	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Average
Respondents	5/260 (1.9%)	6/260 (2.3%)	249/260 (95.8%)	1	7	7	6.4

(2) Instructors' confidence in teaching Chinese through culture (teacher confidence)

(2.1) I feel confident in teaching Chinese through cultural topics.

	Disagree (1~3)	Neutral (4)	Agree (5~7)	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Average
Respondents	12/260 (4.6%)	23/260 (8.8%)	225/260 (86.6%)	1	7	6	5.8

(3) Instructors' time for preparing cultural materials (preparation time)

(3.1) I do not have enough time to prepare the extensive cultural materials.

	Disagree (1~3)	Neutral (4)	Agree (5~7)	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Average
Respondents	49/260 (18.8%)	48/260 (18.5%)	163/260 (62.7%)	1	7	5	4.8

(4) Instructors' usage to use traditional (word and grammar-based) instruction (textbook usage)

(4.1) I have already gotten used to using traditional (word and grammar-based) instruction followed by most Chinese textbooks provided by Chinese schools.

	Disagree (1~3)	Neutral (4)	Agree (5~7)	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Average
Participants	91/260 (35%)	64/260 (24.6%)	105/260 (40.4%)	1	7	4	3.9

(5) Instructors' willingness to integrate more cultural topics in Chinese class (teacher willingness)

(5.1) I would like to add more cultural elements to my regular Chinese classroom.

	Disagree (1~3)	Neutral (4)	Agree (5~7)	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Average
Participants	4/260 (1.5%)	14/260 (5.4%)	242/260 (93.1%)	1	7.	7.	3.

Chart 1. Closed-ended questions (the 7-points Likert Scale)

(6) The target language used in the culture class (language used)

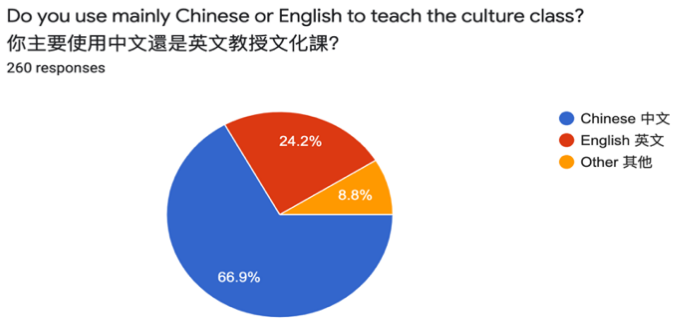


Fig. 3.

(7) Teachers' perceptions of students' language performance in culture class (observe students' language performance)

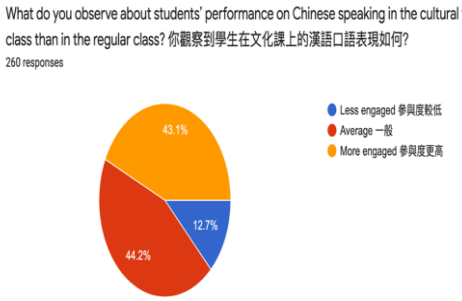


Fig. 4.

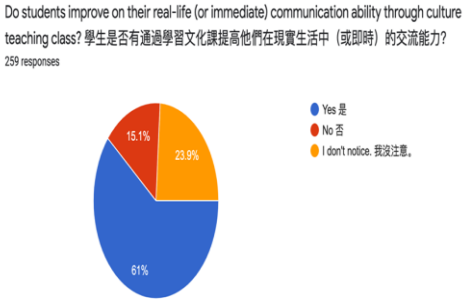


Fig. 5.

Note. One participant did not respond to this question (Figure 5.); percentages were calculated based on the total number of respondents.

(8) Most-commonly taught cultural topics

According to instructors' responses to the online survey, the following topics are commonly taught in Chinese classes.

- **Food** (Dim Sum, Dumplings, Hotpot, Street food, Night market, Tea culture, Chopstick)
- **Festivals** (Chinese New Year, Moon Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Lantern Festival)
- **Arts** (Calligraphy, Traditional costumes, Traditional music, Popular music, Chinese board games)
- **Behaviors** (Greetings, Lucky words, Social interaction, Gift giving culture, Currency and money)
- **Taboo** (Eating etiquette/taboo, Numbers and colors)
- **Beliefs and Thoughts** (Chinese zodiac, Chinese philosophy, Confucius, Feng Shui)

(9) Instructors' feedback about teaching Chinese through culture (feedback)

- **Apply high-impact or high-leverage strategies**: use authentic cultural resources or design communicative activities, guided by the ACTFL Core Practices [9], such as using visual representations, real life scenario, short video clips, social media posts, etc.
- **Teach culture in context:** for example, teach "吃飯" (chī fàn, "to eat a meal") using an image of a real menu rather than an isolated vocabulary list.
- **Start with small-scale integration rather than a full redesign:** instead of teaching vocabulary in isolation, embed it in real-life scenarios, such as ordering food or interacting with family members.
- **Provide scaffolding to support students within their ZPD when teaching culture:** for example, support target-language use through student-centered, teacher-guided instruction. Use sentence frames or starters (e.g., "我看到……" wǒ kàn dào…, meaning "I see…," and "我觉得……" wǒ juéde…, meaning "I think…" or "I feel…") to encourage social interaction through interactive tasks such as think-pair-share and role-play.

5. Findings

The data collected during the first period (April 7–10, with 180 participants) and the second period (April 11–14, with a total of 260 participants) reveal a consistent trend, suggesting that the findings provide meaningful insights. The apparent discrepancy between teachers' recognition of the importance of incorporating cultural perspectives into effective language teaching practices and their actual implementation of these approaches, due to their reliance on traditional grammar- and textbook-based instruction and time constraints, constitutes a major barrier. However, most CFL teachers believe that integrating culture into language teaching can help students develop not only linguistic and cultural competence but also interpersonal communication skills, although students' language performance in cultural lessons varies and their language use remains inconsistent. With culturally appropriate interventions introduced in Chinese

language classrooms from the novice or beginning level, students may demonstrate improved immediate communication skills when interacting with native speakers.

6. Future Implications

CFL teachers can begin immersing students in cultural contexts even at the novice or beginning level and engage them in cultural activities both inside and outside the classroom. These activities can also address other components of the World-Readiness Standards' 5Cs, such as "Communities" and "Comparisons." For example, instructors can organize extended cultural activities that build on in-class instruction and extend learning beyond the classroom, such as taking students on field trips to explore their local communities, visit a bubble tea shop or a Chinese grocery store, or dine at a Chinese restaurant. Such activities can enhance students' Chinese language learning by providing opportunities to engage with the language in authentic cultural and real-world contexts.

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Appendix I. Instructors Perception Survey Sheet

Participants' general information

Institution:
Position:
Your Age:
Years of Teaching Chinese:
Your Native language:
Your Family Language (languages that you speak at home):
Other Foreign Languages You Speak:
Level of Students You Teach:
Age of Students You Teach:

Section 1— Closed-ended questions

7-Point Likert Scale Questionnaire: Please rate each item (1-- strongly disagree, to 7-- strongly agree.)

I would like to prepare extensive cultural materials for my Chinese class because:

1) I am very interested in introducing culture to my students and broadening their eyes to see the world.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2) I feel confident in teaching Chinese through culture.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3) I consider teaching Chinese through culture is a good way for students to learn the language.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4) I do not have enough time to prepare the extensive cultural materials.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5) I have already gotten used to using traditional (word and grammar-based) instruction followed by most Chinese textbooks provided by most Chinese schools.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6) I would like to add more cultural elements to my regular Chinese classroom.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7) I think it is worthwhile to prepare extensive cultural materials for students to learn because this is how language is used in a real-life situation.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Multiple-choice questions

8) Do you use mainly Chinese or English to teach the culture class?
1) Chinese 2) English 3) Other

9) What do you observe about students' performance in Chinese speaking in the cultural teaching class than in the regular class?
1) Less engaged 2) Average 3) More engaged

10) Do students improve on their real-life (or immediate) communication ability through culture teaching class?
1) Yes 2) No 3) I don't notice.

Section 2— Open-ended questions

11) What topics of Chinese culture have you brought into your class so far?

12) What is your feedback about teaching the Chinese language through culture?