

Implementing Critical Content-Based Instruction (CCBI) in Chinese Language Classroom

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Abstract

Critical content-based instruction (CCBI) integrates critical pedagogy and content-based instruction. By applying a critical lens to content-based and culturally based themes in language classes and forging the connectedness between language learning and society, CCBI empowers language teachers to foster not only linguistic and cultural competence but also expand their students' worldviews.

This paper discusses how CCBI was implemented in an advanced Chinese language class at a university in the United States and reflects on the pedagogical considerations and challenges of CCBI. Specially, the course content was revamped for the purpose of engaging students in reflections on contested social issues that are important in our societies. Authentic journalistic and literary texts were selected to demonstrate different perspectives, disrupt stereotypes, and highlight power structures that affect societies and people's lives. In addition to sharing course content and curriculum structure, this paper discusses the teaching strategies used for critical reflection in synchronous and asynchronous settings, such as critical readings of texts, dialogues among students and with native speakers, etc.

Keywords: *Content-based instruction, Chinese language pedagogy*

1. Introduction

In response to rapid social changes and globalization in recent decades, the field of world language education is experiencing what Leaver (2021) describes as the "next paradigm shift". There are increasing discourses that call for contextualizing and situating world language education in the broader context of society for the purpose of cultivating educated speakers of world languages who have deep translingual and transcultural competence. Leaver (2021) summarizes the new paradigm as Transformative Language Learning and Teaching (TLLT), "a manifestation of larger changes already underway in the dominant transactive education philosophy of world language learning: in the twenty-first century, our society is viewing the importance of language and cultural competence for all citizens in a different way than in the twentieth century" (p.13). The events in the past three years have again highlighted the importance of incorporating the goals of cultivating global awareness and enhancing critical thinking in the curriculum and practices. When I was preparing for my spring 2021 courses, the COVID-19 pandemic was raging, anti-Asian hate crimes were increasing sharply, and the nation was awakened by the glaring racial disparities and unprecedented political divide. I realized then that I must redesign my classes to respond to the political and social changes and I adopted the approach of critical content-based instruction to integrate social justice issues in my language teaching. In the sections below, I will first discuss the premises and goals of CCBI and provide some examples of enacting CCBI in language teaching. Next, I will present a case study of my advanced Chinese course to share how CCBI was implemented. Lastly, I will reflect on the pedagogical considerations and challenges of CCBI.

2. From content-based instruction (CBI) to critical content-based instruction (CCBI): a brief overview

CBI is "...the integration of particular content with language teaching aims... the concurrent teaching of academic matter and second language skills" (Brinton et al., 1989, p.2). It has been a widely-used method in language teaching in recent decades in the United States. Its popularity and acceptance can be explained by the following features. First, what qualifies as "content" is not fixed to any subject matter or topic. "It can include any topic, theme, or non-language issue of interest or importance to the learners" (Genesee, 1994, p.3). By combining language and content instruction, CBI offers opportunities to make relevant connections between language learning, learners' interests, subject knowledge, culture, and society, allowing learners to focus on meaning making and developing language proficiency through meaningful communication. As research on second language acquisition indicates, "people learn a second language more successfully when they use the language as a means of acquiring information, rather than as an end in itself" (Richards & Rogers, 2005, p. 207).

Building upon CBI's potential for forging connectedness between language education and other academic fields, Sato et al. (2017) propose critical content-based instruction (CCBI) as the future direction for CBI curricular and practices. CCBI integrates critical perspectives into CBI. It has three "equally important" goals: language and content learning, practicing critical analysis in student learning, and developing a critical disposition. "Thus, as students in CCBI curricula are expected to learn language and content critically, namely through critical analysis, they are also expected to develop their criticality - the skills, knowledge, and disposition required to engage in critical analysis - as an outcome of learning" (Sato et al., 2017, p. 59).

Glynn and Spenader (2020) advocate for using CCBI to teach for social justice in world language classrooms, where teachers and learners can collaboratively use the target language to explore topics of social importance, examine and interpret varied perspectives represented in course materials, and analyze complex real-world problems. They report a study of using CCBI to teach for social justice by four Spanish teachers at the middle school or high school levels in the Midwest region of the United States. Instead of using print textbooks, the teachers chose current and authentic sources from news articles, YouTube, and social media. They taught existing topics in the curriculum, such as clothing and fashion, sports, and travel, etc., in a different way by integrating social justice issues. For example, in a unit on clothing, one teacher "began with school dress code, and students led her into discussions around gender issues and clothing; her 6th graders underscored how much more restrictive the dress code is for students who identify as female. Ultimately, students challenged gender stereotypes as they wrote their own fairy tales. In these CCBI units that integrated language around clothing and fashion, students were able to not only identify, but also to challenge inequities and stereotypes" (p.85).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented urgency to the role of educators in addressing social injustice and promoting inclusivity. In spring 2021, I revamped my courses for the purpose of engaging students in reflections on contested social issues that are important in our societies. Below I will share the goals, content, curriculum structure, teaching strategies, and learning activities in my CHN402 course.

3. CCBI in a Chinese language course: a case study

Implementing CCBI to teach social justice requires careful planning in every aspect of course design. The first step is to understand the interests and needs of my students. A few weeks before the semester, I distributed a survey to enrolled students in CHN402, asking about their experiences of learning Chinese, their goals and interests, and which topics they wish to study. The feedback from the students informed the content, resources, activities and assignments in this course. A week prior to the first day of classes, I invited students to schedule Zoom meetings with me. During these voluntary meetings, I asked my students how they were doing and what concerns they had about the upcoming course. This conversation took place in the target language, which, on one hand, provided students with an impetus to begin speaking in the target language and, on the other hand, gave me a chance to assess students' prior knowledge of the language. At the end of each conversation, I wanted my students to feel safe, supported, and cared for. I also wanted them to know that I was invested in helping them learn and grow. By getting to know my students, I establish the condition for creating a safe and respectful learning environment where students feel encouraged and are willing to engage and learn.

3.1 Articulating learning outcomes and selecting course materials

CHN402 is the highest-level advanced Chinese course for non-heritage speakers at a private university in Atlanta. It is offered every academic year in the spring semester. In this course, students read, discuss and write about social and cultural issues in the Chinese-speaking world. When using a commercially available textbook, the goals focused on developing students' Chinese language proficiency and their understanding of Chinese people, culture and society. The textbooks we used included lessons on a wide range of topics, from cell phone use, adoption of Chinese children, to filial piety and Hang Zhou's West Lake. While the books exposed students to diverse phenomena in Chinese society and fostered the learning of language and culture, they were not designed for in-depth investigation of important social issues. Thus, enhancing students' criticality through texts of diverse perspectives was not a learning outcome and CCBI was not utilized in the classroom. In spring 2021, the course was conceptualized differently. It used CCBI to teach social justice issues. Consequently, in addition to the dual goals of learning language and content, it also aimed to foster the skills, knowledge and disposition for critical analysis, and this goal was stated in the syllabus. Specifically, the learning outcomes of this course were stated as follows in the syllabus:

“By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- 1) comprehend texts of various voices and viewpoints, use resources to increase vocabulary and gain deeper understanding of the texts by “reading between the lines”,
- 2) analyze and evaluate informational/expository texts and literary/narrative texts in speaking and writing to develop insights about important social issues that impact the world today,
- 3) reconstruct and express multiple points of view using connected paragraphs, both in speaking and in writing, and integrate a historic, geographic, civic, or cultural perspective,
- 4) think critically about topics of community, national, or international interests, and about their own cultures, be able to empathize with experiences and perspectives of others,
- 5) develop skills of an autonomous learner, such as taking control of their own learning, setting their own goals, staying motivated and organized, as well as having the ability to access and evaluate information.”

The next step in the planning process is to select and develop learning materials that align with the outcomes. As the COVID-19 pandemic and its various politically-charged names, such as “kung flu”, “China virus”, spread to all continents, anti-China narratives gained momentum around the world. Anti-Asian violence spiked during the pandemic in the U.S. According to a study by Perlinger (2022), “almost half of the anti-Asian attacks in 2020 and 2021 were motivated, at least partially, by anger and animosity associated with COVID-19”. Under this historical backdrop, I find it critical that students engage with authentic texts in this course, so that they can explore social justice issues from diverse perspectives and develop the ability to think and analyze critically. CHN402 consisted of four thematic units. They were 1) Wuhan lockdown and the controversy surrounding Fang Fang’s diary, 2) the deterioration of U.S.-China relations and its impact on studying abroad, 3) Anti-Asian violence and women in workplace, and 4) Inequality and social power in Chinese society.

The texts in each unit came from two sources: those selected by me, the instructor, for close-reading, in-class discussion, and assessment; and those recommended by students, through the means of pair projects, for expanding the scope of content. There are several considerations that went into selecting texts. First, the texts should represent a variety of genres and writing styles, and the level of difficulty should be appropriate for the course and the students so that they are challenged to comprehend texts and develop their language proficiency. There were literary and narrative texts, such as Fang Fang’s diary, and an excerpt from *Dancing Through Red Dust*, a novel by Murong Xuecun. Another key genre was journalistic writings from a variety of media formats such as newspapers, Chinese Weibo and YouTube. These texts were timely reports of current events of political and social importance. Secondly, they represented diverse perspectives and life experiences for the purpose of broadening students’ worldviews and sharpening their ability to critically analyze texts. The texts were written by people of diverse backgrounds and experiences, ranging from famous Chinese novelists to news reporters in China and in the West, and thus representing a myriad of viewpoints. Finally, multiple social justice issues were either implied or overtly described in the selected texts, allowing students to explore various social issues and enhance their social consciousness. For instance, students read news reports about the sexual harassment case against Zhu Jun, a famous CCTV anchor, the spa shooting in Atlanta in the spring of 2021 that killed eight people among them six Asian women, the opposing views surrounding Fang Fang’s diary that documented her daily life during the Wuhan lockdown, and the experience of Chinese students during the pandemic. These issues were and still are essential to our understanding of the social and cultural reality. Students were motivated to engage with those issues and to critically examine how they impacted their own lives and the world around them.

For each selected text, I created a series of materials to facilitate student learning. The materials included 1) a study guide with background information, questions to check comprehension, and extended questions that require students to think deeper and critically about social issues, 2) a vocabulary list, 3) an audio recording, 4) an instructional video, 5) preview assignment and other assessment.

3.2 Utilizing critical pedagogy in CCBI classroom

Developing learning outcomes and course materials is an important step in creating a CCBI course. The next question is: what pedagogical approaches could potentially be effective for teaching social justice issues? Randolph Jr. and Johnson (2017) identify critical pedagogy, which is defined as “any classroom practice that addresses difference, power, or social stratification in the classroom or in the world” (Johnson & Randolph, 2015, p. 36), as the path to follow to “arrive at social justice in our classrooms as a result of our instruction” (p. 108).

In CHN402, I aimed for students to think critically about the social issues, analyze the issues from multiple perspectives, and create opportunities for critical and dialogic engagement with authentic texts. Each lesson began with asynchronous self-learning. Students were responsible for reading/viewing the assigned texts before the class met synchronously. They also completed a preview assignment on VoiceThread video by answering questions that check their basic comprehension of the texts and prepared for a vocabulary quiz. When they logged on to join the synchronous class, they were familiar with the text and had considered the extended questions in the study guide, and therefore they were ready to engage in critical analysis with their peers. For example, the article “2 Immigrant Paths: One Led to Wealth, the Other Ended in Death in Atlanta” (New York Times, March 24, 2021) highlights the strikingly different experiences of Asian immigrants: owners and employees at the spas attacked in the spa shooting in Atlanta had similar dreams but were separated by a vast gap in money and power. The extended questions in the study guide focused on two issues: the gap between rich and poor among Asian Americans and the increase of anti-Asian violence in America. During class, students worked in small groups in breakout rooms on Zoom to discuss the causes and consequences of these issues. They first shared their thoughts verbally and then wrote down their key ideas on the shared slides on Google Drive. When the class came back to the main room on Zoom, everyone was ready to engage. Since the shooting took place in Atlanta, where our university is located, the discussion began with students sharing how the shootings affected them personally and how their Chinese/Asian friends reacted to the tragedy. This laid the ground for building a community with shared experiences and feelings. Then we delved into examining the gap in wealth among Asian immigrants and we came to the realization that many social and cultural factors contributed to it: immigrants’ educational, financial, and family backgrounds, their age and gender, and their proficiency in English all played a role in their experience as immigrants. This led to further awareness of the social inequality and economic disparity among Asian Americans and resulted in the broadening of students’ perspectives and their understanding of immigrants. The last activity of this lesson was the sharing of potential actions we could take to promote social justice. Considering that Emory students’ interactions with Asian immigrants are usually limited to that of Chinese/Asian students on campus, who mostly come from families with tremendous wealth and rich cultural capital, a class like this proves to be a valuable and eye-opening experience for students.

Another strategy that worked to broaden students’ experiences and perspectives was to enable conversations with native speakers of Chinese, who joined us online from Beijing, Xi’an and Gansu Province in China. In Unit 1, an owner of a travel agency in China and a teacher of Chinese as a second language told us about the impact of COVID-19 on their lives and their professions. We learned that the travel agency remained closed since the beginning of the pandemic as China continues to keep its borders closed. The teacher, who lost her job due to the lack of students, embarked on a new career by teaching English online to Chinese students. The conversations between Chinese speakers and the students linked the class to the real world and allowed students to develop understanding and empathy for others.

Lastly, teachers and students are collaborators and coinvestigators in a CCBI classroom. As we co-construct knowledge and information, we gain the knowledge, skill and disposition for social engagement in a collaborative way. One effective assignment for this purpose is the pair project. At the end of each unit, pairs of students shared their recommended texts/videos with the class by uploading the materials and a vocabulary list on the shared folder on Google Drive and gave oral presentations in class. Their presentations included not only the content of the materials, but also their own reflections and analysis. For unit 3 students recommended Tang Weiwei’s song “Xiaojuan” (YouTube, December 18, 2020), which calls out the domestic violence problem in China. Another pair of students recommended a Ted Talk entitled “How We Can Make Racism a Solvable Problem and Improving Policing” (TED2019). These materials enriched the course content, led to a more in-depth discussion of the social justice issues, and provided opportunities for students to develop all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) of language proficiency at the same time.

4. Reflections and challenges in building a CCBI classroom

Using CCBI to teach for social justice has been a pedagogically rewarding experience for me as a teacher. I began by educating myself about issues of inequality, imbalance of power, and economic disparity, and learning about useful pedagogical approaches for teaching social justice. The process allowed me to develop respect and empathy for my students, for their voices, interests, and perspectives. In the classroom, discussions of social justice issues can be difficult, controversial, and at times painful. It is particularly important to establish clear expectations and guidelines for discussions from the onset and foster an environment of respect and trust. At the end of the first,



second, and third units, students gave me feedback about the course and their own learning, which allowed me to discover and address any concerns students had and made adjustments in the following units. The written reflections also revealed that in a CCBI setting, students made progress in terms of achieving the learning outcomes. As one student commented, the class transformed her from “just a textbook studier” to “more of a worldly speaker”.

Implementing CCBI for social justice is challenging. Sato et al. (2017) point out that it “may conflict or prove incompatible with institutional environments that prioritize efficiency and practicality” and another challenge is to “avoid imposing certain perspective” (p. 63). In my experience, maintaining a balance between language learning and addressing social justice issues is an additional challenge. Assessment of a CCBI course needs to include ways to assess how well students acquire the language and content and how their criticality is enhanced. I created instructional videos (with embedded practices) to call students’ attention to key language features and usage. I tried to align different assignments to certain learning outcomes. For instance, reflective essays at the end of a unit served to assess how their perspectives were broadened or changed and if they were able to critically analyze the social issues. Vocabulary quizzes and tests were designed to assess the development of their language skills. Asynchronous learning activities helped students to become more autonomous in their own learning. Moreover, I mixed low-stakes assignments with traditional high-stakes assignments in order to include various means for students to demonstrate their learning. Low-stakes assignments included essays of feedback about the course and their progress, preview assignments, and one-on-one speaking assignments. Lastly, designing CCBI lessons is a time-consuming endeavor, requiring teachers to reexamine all aspects of the course: its goals, content, pedagogies, and assessments. Clearly, not everyone is ready to revamp the entire course. One can begin with a small part of a course, such as a lesson or a unit.

In summary, CCBI was enacted in CHN402 in spring 2021 to integrate the examination of social justice issues in a Chinese language classroom. The course relied on authentic texts on topics of social inequality, economic disparity, violence against marginalized groups, and the impact of the pandemic. Through critical and dialogical engagement with the texts, students were able to broaden their knowledge, develop their language skill, and sharpen their criticality. In the process, they become more empathetic towards marginalized groups and more aware of social unjust in the society.

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