



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

Hui-Chun Cheng

University of Pittsburgh, USA

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 most CFL teachers consider culture-integrated language teaching to be valuable. They believe that students can begin exploring Chinese culture at the beginning level and that integrating cultural context into language learning supports and enhances students' interpersonal communication skills in Chinese.

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 (ACTFL, 2015). 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 3P's) of the target culture (ACTFL, 2015). In addition, FL learners need to learn how to apply the cultural knowledge with their linguistic skills when having a real-world conversation with (native) Chinese speakers (Christensen, 2006) [2]. Culture and communication cannot be separated: the way a person communicates is influenced by his or her culture as well (Bovee and Thill, 2016). The meaning of words, the significance of gestures, and the rules of social interaction are defined differently in different 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).

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 (Urie Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Linguistically, contextualized learning contains vocabulary, grammar, and real-world functions, including its lexical categories, sentence structures, patterns of discourse, and communicative functions [4]. 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 [1]. CFL teachers need to provide students with authentic written and spoken texts, as well as cultural contexts, and connect them with the target culture (Sanchez-Lopez, 2006) within a contextualized language learning environment beyond the traditional language classroom (Hong, 1997).

III. Applying Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory into Linguistic and Cultural Development.

Vygotsky's theory (1961) has been discussed a lot in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and second language learning (SLL) (Zhang & Du, 2013) [11]. As Vygotsky (1961) said, "Language is a cultural tool – it helps people learn how to function within a culture." To help students to achieve their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), CFL teachers must scaffold their learning and instruct them how to make meaning in context and in a culturally acceptable way to minimize any misunderstanding of different cultures, thus developing both "linguistic competence" and "cultural competence," as well as 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 [6]:

(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" [10]. Fig.1. provides an example that CFL teachers can use in a class that integrates culture into linguistic instruction. From this menu, students learn vocabulary items and practice sentence structures "我想点 (wǒ xiǎng diǎn)" related to ordering drinks.

The Boba Tea Recipe
珍珠奶茶 zhēn zhū nǎi chá
Customized your Boba!

STEP 1: CHOOSE YOUR SIZE
Size : 小杯 xiǎo bēi small 中杯 zhōng bēi medium 大杯 dà bēi large

STEP 2: CHOOSE YOUR DRINK
红茶 hóng chá Black Tea
绿茶 / 綠茶 lǜ chá Green Tea
乌龙茶 / 烏龍茶 wū lóng chá Oolong Tea
黑糖奶茶 hēi táng nǎi chá Brown Sugar Milk Tea
港式奶茶 gǎng shì nǎi chá Hong Kong Milk Tea
(also called 鸳鸯 Yuanyang- Mandarin duck): Consists of black tea, coffee, and milk.
芋头奶茶 / 芋頭奶茶 yù tóu nǎi chá Taro Milk Tea : Taro is a kind of Asian sweet potato.
泰式奶茶 tài shì nǎi chá Thai Tea : The tea is from Thailand.
抹茶 mǒ chá Matcha Latte : Japanese style
奶盖茶 / 奶蓋茶 nǎi gài chá Tea with Cheese Milk Foam
冰沙 bīng shā Smoothies: Contains fruit and tea

STEP 3: ADD YOUR TOPPINGS 加料 jiā liào



珍珠 zhēn zhū / 波霸 bō bà



仙草 xiān cǎo Grass Jelly



布丁 bù dīng Pudding



椰果 yē guǒ Lychee



寒天 hán tiān Aloe

STEP 4: ICE AND SUGAR LEVEL

冰块 bīng kuài Ice
去冰 qù bīng 0% ice
微冰 wēi bīng 30% ice
半冰 bàn bīng 50% ice
少糖 shǎo bīng 70% ice
正常 zhèng cháng bīng 100% ice
熟的 rè de Hot

甜度 tián dù Sugar Level
無糖 wú táng 0% sugar
微糖 wēi táng 30% sugar
半糖 bàn táng 50% sugar
少糖 shǎo táng 70% sugar
正常 zhèng cháng táng 100% sugar

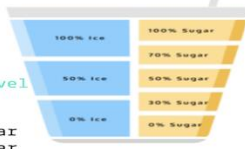


Fig. 1. Boba Tea Menu



(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.” For example, instructors can design and implement interpersonal communication tasks for pairs, small groups, and the whole class, as well as create meaning-making exercises that require students to engage in deeper language processing by generating contextual information that gives rise to a conversation (Rings, 2000). Fig.2. provides a real-life dialogue for students to apply in role-play or think-pair-share activities.

店员(diàn yuán, 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 shí me size ?

客人 : 大 杯。 Large.

dà bēi

店员 : 加 什 么 料 吗? Any topping?

jiā shí me 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.

Fig. 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” (Hong,1997). For example, when instructors teach students how to perform a speech act of ordering drinks in a boba tea shop by saying “去冰少糖 (qù bīng shǎo táng),” they have to teach students to understand the “cultural concept” behind such an utterance (see Table 1.). Students need to understand why and how the “scripts” of ordering drinks in Chinese and American cultures are so different while also gaining awareness of Chinese food culture.



Table 1. Cultural 3P's of Boba Tea

Cultural Products (like food, clothes....)	Cultural Practices (What people do?)	Cultural Perspectives (How people think? For example, 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 (Allen, 2000). 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' linguistic and cultural competence?
- What feedback do CFL teachers provide on teaching Chinese through culture that can benefit Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) Education?

3. Data Collection

The online questionnaire was administered through Google form from April 7 to April 14. It was posted on a CFL teachers' Facebook group, which has 24,100 members. The study used a mixed-methods approach.

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). Aside from these 7-Point Likert Scale items, the survey contained three multiple-choice questions, and the open-ended questions that the teacher participants can 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

Instructors consider that culture-integrated language teaching in Chinese class is interesting (**perception (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 is 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%**).



(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)

Based on Chart 1, most CFL teachers strongly agree that teaching through culture is valuable and improves language learning (very high averages ~6.3–6.7). However, there is still reliance on traditional grammar/textbook-based instruction, and time constraint is a major barrier. Teachers believe culture improves interpersonal communication, but student performance in culture-based lessons is more varied (lower average ~3.9–4.8). Culture supports communication, but student language use is mixed.

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

Do you use mainly Chinese or English to teach the culture class?
你主要使用中文還是英文教授文化課?
260 responses

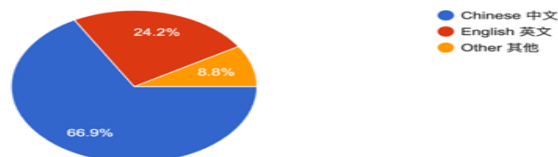


Fig.3. Teachers' perceptions of students' language performance in culture class (observe students' language performance)



What do you observe about students' performance on Chinese speaking in the cultural teaching class than in the regular class? 你觀察到學生在文化課上的漢語口語表現如何?
260 responses

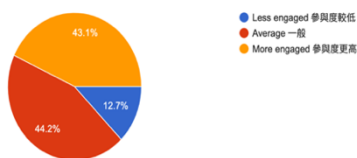


Fig.4.

Do students improve on their real-life (or immediate) communication ability through culture teaching class? 學生是否有通過學習文化課提高他們在現實生活中（或即時）的交流能力?
259 responses

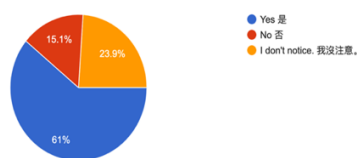


Fig.5.

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

(6) Most-commonly taught cultural topics

According to instructors' responses from the online survey, Festival (Chinese New Year, Moon Festival, Lantern Festival, and Dragon Boat Festival), Food (Chinese food, Dumpling, Street food, and Tea culture), Things to do (Greeting, Social interaction, Gift giving culture, Lucky words, Order the drink, Chopsticks, Calligraphy, Traditional custom, Traditional music, Popular music, Chinese board games, Currency and money), Taboo (Eating etiquette/taboo, Numbers and colors), Beliefs and Thoughts (Confucius, Chinese Zodiac, Feng Shui, Chinese philosophy, and etc.) are commonly taught in Chinese class.

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

Most CFL teachers suggest:

- Do "culture in context": for example, teaching “吃飯 (chī fàn)” through a real menu image instead of a word list.
- Start small integration, not a full redesign: instead of teaching vocabulary in isolation, embed it in a real-life scenario (such as ordering food, family interaction).
- Use low-prep, high-impact strategies: for example, reusing authentic materials (short videos, images, menus, social media posts).
- Provide scaffolding (ZPD support) when teaching culture: for example, keep target language use supported (student-centered but teacher guided), use sentence frames or starters (e.g., “我看到 wǒ kàn dào ...”, “我覺得 wǒ jiào dé ...”), to engage students' social interaction through interactive tasks (such as think/pair/share, role-play).

5. Findings

The data I collected during the first period (from 4/7 to 4/10 with 180 participants) and the second period (from 4/11 to 4/14 with a total of 260 participants) reveals a consistent and stable trend, which shows that the data is insightful. The findings of this study are consistent with the previous findings by Yu (2009) and Lai (2015) [5]. Learning the target culture provides learners with a strong motivation by making language learning more related to real world context and applicable to communication opportunities (Yu, 2009) [10]. In addition, cultural, real-life, or authentic materials may offer students a new perspective to different cultures (Martin, 2012). With culturally appropriate intervention in Chinese classrooms, students develop both linguistic and cultural competence and demonstrate improved communication skills when interacting with (native) speakers.

6. Future Implications

CFL teachers can start to instruct students to explore Chinese culture at the beginning level through cultural context and hence improving both their cultural and linguistic competence, which brings positive implications. Instructors can provide students with extended cultural activities after the in-class lecture and beyond the classroom, helping them to connect to other standards of 5Cs, e.g., “communication” or



“communities.” For example, teachers can bring students on a field trip to engage in their community, such as going to a boba tea shop, a Chinese grocery store, or a Chinese restaurant, and thus to enhance their Chinese language learning within cultural and real-world contexts.

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