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Navigating the Digital World: Teaching Contemporary Chinese Culture in UK Universities via a Third Space with a Multimodal Approach

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores a multimodal approach to teaching Contemporary Chinese Culture to foster university students' intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence via a third space. Two universities in the UK took part in the study where the course contents moved from static notions of culture-as-fact in terms of national traditions to digital presentation of and live discussion about contemporary China. The pedagogy includes discussing Chinese celebrities' digital videos and films on digital platforms, and students' digital presentations in multimodal modes. Findings from students' comments in the module evaluations, students' reflective essays, and lecturers' observations prove the viability of this approach and the data analyzed via themes address the function of the third space, the application of multimodality, and approaches to intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence. The paper suggests that multimodality can be an effective approach to advancing theory and practice in future contemporary culture teaching and research in other higher education contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The recent UK Higher Education Policy Institute Report (Natzler, 2022) highlights the need to increase the understanding of the Chinese culture, people, and society in light of extensive collaborations and research. This supports another British Council report, which pinpoints that Chinese is one of the five top languages mostly learned (Spanish, Mandarin, French, Arabic, and German), and besides speaking another language, understanding another culture is equally important and crucial (Campbell-Cree, 2017). The report stresses that "We need to strengthen our international influence and cultural relationships. The extent to which we can do this in the long term depends greatly on the ability of our young people to understand and connect with people around the world. Intercultural awareness is crucial for the UK's success on the world stage, and in enabling the UK's next generation to play a meaningful role in the global economy and in an increasingly networked world". Indeed, speaking another language is not just about having a basic conversation with the people speaking that language, it is the understanding of its culture that opens doors to international experiences and opportunities. Regarding students' future careers, UK employers and business leaders have a growing concern with graduates' international cultural awareness – 74% of 500 business leaders surveyed (Education Committee, 2012) worried that young people's horizons are not broad enough to operate in a globalized economy; 39% of employers were dissatisfied with graduates' international cultural awareness. To be specific about the Chinese culture, most British business leaders assert that students with knowledge and skills of Chinese culture and language will have advantages in their careers (Zhang & Li, 2022). All the above concerns, dissatisfactions, and insights point to an urgent need to introduce Chinese culture and language to the students in the UK. However, how to carry it out in the current digital world, especially after the pandemic, is a task faced by foreign culture and language educators throughout all universities (Hartono, Suparto, & Hassan, 2021; Mustafakulova, 2022). This study is an attempt to deal with this issue by exploring a multimodal

approach to aid students in becoming well-equipped and competent global communicators through consciously attending to and reflecting on the meaning-making of another culture for intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence in the digital learning environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Chinese Culture and Language Teaching in the UK

Chinese culture and language have been gradually introduced as a subject in the education system across major sectors (Jin, 2020; Zhang & Li, 2022). A Mandarin Excellence Program which was successfully launched to promote learning the Chinese culture and language in higher education in the UK is extended for a further three years to expand the support at the school level (Killworth & Mezbourian, 2021). The peak of Chinese culture and language teaching was from 2000 to 2017, with more than three-quarters of universities in the UK providing Chinese courses and degree programs (Zhang & Li, 2019). Apart from offering Chinese single degree programs, most universities offer a combined undergraduate degree or joint-degree program with Chinese and another subject, including another language, business, and international relations, or as a non-credit-bearing course (Jin, 2020; Zhang & Li, 2022).

The contents and approaches to teaching culture vary, as Byrd et al., (2011) and Smith (2013) identified that, in terms of teaching culture in practice, teachers often experience it as a problem or meet great difficulties due to a lack of frameworks, strategies, and resources. Lazaraton (2003) is also discontent with the cultural teaching situation in that the majority of the selected content only involved basic knowledge and facts. In addition, interaction and discussion are often lacking or missing in culture learning classrooms (Smith 2013; Lin 2017).

To meet the needs of content selection and teaching pedagogy advancement, the Framework of Reference for Chinese Culture and Society in International Chinese Education was published by the Ministry of Education of China (Centre for Language Education and Cooperation, 2021). The framework of reference includes cognitive understanding, emotional attitude, behavioral skills, Chinese culture knowledge, Chinese cultural awareness, etc. and it provides a valuable cultural teaching content framework for international Chinese teachers and educators. This timely framework has defined and specified the contents and goals of teaching Chinese culture for cultural courses, classroom teaching, textbook compilation, and assessing students' cultural competence. Although this framework of reference is comprehensive, systematic, and objective, only the first part 'content' is completed for the first phase, while the second part 'pedagogy' or teaching 'approaches' in the second phase has not started yet. This study aims to explore a multimodal approach to teaching Contemporary Chinese Culture, with the hope that the insight of the design, the gains, and experience from the experiment could be considered as a reference to be used in other institutions offering similar courses or in other contexts.

A Multimodal Approach

A multimodal approach embraces active learning pedagogy and learner-centeredness, as the multimodal mode includes descriptive (verbal, graphic, tabular, written), figurative (pictorial, analogous, symbolic, and metaphoric), and kinesthetic gestural representations with videos that combines elements of print, visual images, and design (Guenier, 2020; Guenier and Li, 2021).

With these multiple functions, a multimodal approach encourages rethinking the way in which teaching, and learning are designed, approached, and practiced because it promotes the way in which pedagogies, content, and technology can be used in a variety of contexts (Hassett & Curwood, 2009). When integrated into a consistent pedagogic strategy with clearly defined teaching objectives and instructions, a multimodal approach can be available for educators and contribute to active, and learner-centered pedagogies (Philippe et al., 2020). A multimodal approach can enrich teachers' learning material, offer authentic information and real-life culture and language in context, and enlarge the classroom capacities. A multimodal approach has been inspiring students for learning interests and learning efficiency (Hung, 2016; Philippe et al., 2020).

The increasing use of a multimodal approach in education offers the possibility of presenting content in multiple forms and ubiquitous media to accommodate different learning aims and outcomes, assessment methods, and feedback mechanisms, thus helping students increase their capacity for innovation, leadership, multi-and inter-disciplinary collaboration, critical skills, collaboration, and problem-solving skills in a participatory environment. The integration of multimodal learning into different modes of learning encourages students to develop a more flexible learning style based on inquiry and information retrieval, and thus learning becomes deeper and more meaningful when a multimodal approach is used rather than using text alone (Hazari, North, & Moreland, 2009; Mayer, 2005). The digital presentation of information can facilitate deeper learning by triggering students' inspiration and creation. Moreover, new media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok can form a relatively stable cultural settlement ecology for students directly interacting with native speakers or people from different cultural backgrounds. All these benefits that a multimodal approach can offer prompt the researchers to test its effects in a cultural teaching context in the UK.

Third Space

Bhabha (2012) defines the 'third space' as "moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (p. 2). It is to rethink culture as a dynamic process that is open to the integration of new possibilities (Yeh and Heng, 2022). The 'third space' serves as an important junction in which foreign language students from different linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds build bridges and navigate unfamiliar terrain to generate new knowledge and learning. It is a space where "new understandings, especially those related to culture, can be negotiated" (Pitts and Brooks, 2017:5), and it is a meeting point for people of different cultures to promote their intercultural awareness so they can thrive as interlocutors in the global society.

To create a third space in a culture teaching class, students can be encouraged to critically reflect on their own cultural norms and values and share this knowledge with their peers and language learners of other cultural backgrounds, or with native speakers. Liberated from the structures and hierarchies of their 'home' culture and the 'other' culture, social actors can (re)negotiate their identities and (re)position themselves within the third space, and thus members of both the home and target cultures are able to experience shared perspectives (Dobinson, 2014). It is worth noticing that the third space understands both cultures not based on the exoticisms of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity.

In other words, the third space provides students with a middle ground, where they can observe cultural disparities and exchange significant and corresponding reconstructive ideas, and thus intercultural communication is seen as one of the immediate results of combining different cultures. The middle ground provides students with the opportunity and freedom to identify a unique domain which may translate to appreciating the different cultures of fellow students. Regardless of whether they wish to adopt the new lifestyle and behavior patterns of the target culture, students can retain the aspects of their culture while learning a new culture and assimilating new ways of life.

Based on these advantages, this study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of creating a third space for students learning Chinese culture, and in this space, they can discuss with their peers and thus bring together their diverse linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds to increase their intercultural awareness.

The need to introduce Chinese culture to the students in the UK, the affordance of multimodality, and the possibility of creating a third space to foster students' intercultural awareness and develop students' intercultural communication competence prompted this study, which is driven by two research questions: 1) How effective can a multimodal approach be applied to teaching contemporary Chinese culture? 2) What insights do students gain about learning Chinese culture via a third space for intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence?

RESEARCH METHODS:

A qualitative design within a constructivist framework was adopted to analyze two primary data sources: (1) students' comments on the module evaluation to derive their perception of the multimodal approach, and (2) students' reflective essays to monitor their continuing progress in learning Chinese culture. These data will be triangulated with lecturers' observation notes to compare this year and last year's classes to see if this approach makes a difference.

Participants

Twenty students participated in this study, with ten in each of the two universities. Participants in the first university (case 1) were all final-year students (F=7, M=3), aging 19-22, and among whom, most were keen on Chinese language studies, some had a vague idea of Chinese culture, and one student had barely any knowledge about China and chose this module only because it is different from other European cultures. They may or may not have learned the Chinese language before, as this is not a criterion for module enrollment. Participants in the other university (case 2) were all second-year students (F=6, M=4), aging 17-21, and all of them learned the Chinese language and Chinese history in their first-year study at the university.

Data Collection

As this study focuses on an investigation of the effects of a multimodal approach for students to engage in learning Contemporary Chinese Culture, their comments crucial which were taken from the module evaluation and students' reflective essays. The module evaluations were organized by the universities at the end of the semester from which the comments were extracted for this research with permission given by the universities. Students' reflective essays were

collected twice during the semester (in case 1), and every other week (in case 2), and in both cases, consent was given by the students who were aware that their work would be used for research purposes. Classes, where the lecturers did observations, were automatically recorded by the universities as a podcast for students who might have to miss the classes. Two researchers cross-checked the comments to be used for analysis, and an agreement on the comments was reached. The triangulated data were analyzed via themes because according to Clarke and Braun (2017, p.297), thematic analysis can be used as a tool to identify, analyze, and interpret ‘patterns of meaning (themes)’ of the data. Distinguished from other methods, the feature of thematic analysis is its flexibility, regardless of the sample size or data collection methods (Vaismoradi et al., 2013), and therefore, the thematic analysis is deemed a suitable method for this study.

Students’ comments on the module evaluations and reflective essays were first categorized into an umbrella of codes pertaining to their intercultural awareness, and insights and more specific themes emerged. Reiterating the stages of identification, analysis, and interpretation, the researchers read and re-read the comments to obtain meanings within the data relevant to the research focus.

THE STUDY

The study was conducted in the academic year 2021 - 2022 (in case 1) and 2020-2022 (in case 2), when all the lectures were online. After brainstorming, revising, and finalizing, the two researchers, who were also the lecturers for the courses, agreed on the topics for each week (contemporary China), delivery mode (multimodal), learning activities (critical discussion) assessment (presentation + essay), and feedback (oral feedback for presentation + written feedback for essay). After the course outline is set up, the courses were delivered in the two universities in the UK, respectively.

Case 1

This is a Contemporary Chinese Culture module for final-year students across majors in Law, Commerce, Politics and International relations, Economics, and Archaeology in a joint-major program. The focus of the module is on contemporary China with the most modern features, including super-speed rail, mobile payment, e-commerce, bike-sharing, etc. Before the pandemic, the cultural elements were introduced in class, where students mainly learned the concepts from the lecturer’s PowerPoint slides and handouts, but this year, these new concepts were introduced and discussed on multimodal platforms where students could see exactly how fast the trains with maximum speeds of 350 kph (217 mph), for example, and discussed the transport in their home country or other countries. Also with the multimodal approach, Chinese influencers’ videos were selected and shown to the students, for example, Li Ziqi with 2.7 billion views on YouTube, and in 2021, she broke the Guinness World Record of “the most subscribed Chinese channel” with 16 million subscriptions.

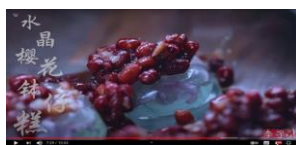


Figure 1 crystal cherry blossom pudding cake
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mv7RT3xR0bI>



Figure 2 Avoid crowds, and feel the spring

While seeing the influencer’s videos, students commented that “Beautiful. I feel like I am in that minority area, wearing their folk dress, riding a horse like her, picking up wildflowers, arranging the flowers in a style, and taking the tips of plants as ingredients for cooking”. “I seem to have understood more, e.g., riding a horse instead of a car might indicate to avoid pollution, and grandma had the first bite shows their filial piety, perhaps”. “She always picks fruits and vegs in season. She shows us to eat bean sprouts, melons, and jelly to cool down in summer, and cook ginger sugar, plum pigeon soup, and hot pot to warm up in winter. This reminds of me of something I read about Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) diet, so TCM is still used in people’s everyday life”.

Apart from resources from influencers, popular cultural exploration programs such as National Treasure, Letters Alive, The Reader, Trust in China, The Chinese Poetry Competition, Everlasting Classics, Special Originals, and The Great Shokunin were also used in class to present contemporary Chinese culture. Social media including Weibo, Bilibili, Tik-Tok, and Zhihu were used for live communication with Chinese people or with other audiences watching the show.

Case 2

This is an optional Chinese culture module for second-year students learning Chinese in a combined undergraduate degree program. The aims and objectives are to facilitate a deep understanding of contemporary Chinese cultural, social, political, and economic society. The module was on a multimodal platform where a selection of films and documentaries were shown. Students study a film or topic every two weeks and submit a reflective essay accordingly. In week one, students watch a chosen film available on a digital platform with a provided link, accompanied by reading materials, and a set of questions to guide students to understand the cultural context and research articles relevant to these cultural contexts. A focus group discussion takes place in week two when students discuss their thoughts on the film/topic from a cultural learning perspective among students themselves, and with the lecturer.

For example, *Lilting*, a BBC film about Chinese culture, British culture, the generation gap, etc., was shown in class. The story spreads around four characters: a Chinese mom with little English was put in a care home in London by her son who thinks it is a responsible way to take care of his mom. The son’s boyfriend (gay) can hardly get the mom’s approval for their gay relationship. A British man in the care home is fond of the mom but can hardly communicate with her because of the language barrier. The misunderstandings, miscommunications, and different cultural norms initiated heated discussions among students.



Scene 1: dating with the help of a translator



Scene 2: cooking bacon with chopsticks.

“I think the concept of gay is more and more accepted in Chinese culture. Look, the British guy can use chopsticks to cook bacon for the boy. They really love each other”. “Apart from gay, other concepts such as girls over 30 years old still not married (大齡剩女), young couples do not

want any children (丁克家庭), seniors looking after each other in the community (抱团养老) are also challenged but accepted in China now, I heard”.

Apart from showing and discussing films, two guest speakers were invited to give talks via Microsoft Teams on their research and share insights relevant to the topics covered in the module. The talks were also on a multimodal platform with a mixture of texts, pictures, and videos. For example, one of the guests was a British citizen working in Beijing, who talked about the life of the Chinese people he saw. His real-life story impressed students, especially when illustrating his point with real photos on the spot. Students said it was like seeing a documentary film and “seeing is believing”.

In addition, a language buddy program was also operated to support students’ cultural learning with each student in the UK paired up with a Chinese student in China. Students on both sides used WeChat or TikTok to communicate, and sometimes with texts, voice messages, and video clips to enhance their cultural learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three main themes emerged from students’ comments from module evaluations, reflective essays, and lecturers’ observations, including a multimodal approach to culture teaching, third space, and intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence.

A Multimodal Approach to Culture Teaching

The multimodal approach to culture teaching is found to be effectively used in both cases in the study, as it helps increase the audio-visual effects which lead to discussion. and more importantly, the multimodal approach enriches students’ learning experience. With the employment of various media and social media platforms, students experienced the contemporary culture and communicated with Chinese people directly, which enhances intercultural communication skills. In a way, this approach is also in line with the current policy in British universities in terms of improving students’ accessibility and participation.

As students reflected that the knowledge they had about China before was either from books or from friends, which is restricted to knowledge transmission with one dimension; however, the multimodal approach enabled them to engage in digital communications so that they can exchange ideas and perspectives spontaneously. “When I was reading the text before, I could not help looking the new words up from a dictionary, because otherwise, I could only partially understand. Now I can get hints from the background images, music, facial expressions, and context, which makes it much easier for me”. As the student’s comments indicate, students had fewer barriers to understanding the learning materials about the target culture with the aid of multimodal presentations. This finding is consistent with Philippe et al., (2020) that a multimodal approach enriches teachers’ learning material, offers authentic information and real-life culture, and thus enlarges cultural teaching capacities.

Third space for comparative study and deep understanding

A third space is found in this study to be a ‘safe area’ where students exchanged ideas on cultural norms and the discussions expanded or deepened their understandings. Numerous examples are given by the students in this study, e.g., “the Chinese food in China towns includes deep-fried beef (Chinese way) with ketchup source (western way), etc., an integration of Chinese and western culture”, “a porcelain with blue colour on a white background by Willow Pattern (western painter), coloured with willow branches, and pavilions, (Chinese architecture)”, “Qing Emperor Kangxi painted by an Italian artist Lang Shining (Giuseppe Castiglione). Indeed, with the combination of Chinese and western painting techniques and styles, both Chinese and Westerners feel the painting is not typical Chinese or western art, but it has drawn the excellence from both sides to have created something new and better in the process of cultural exchange. This reflects Halliday’s (2022) idea of seeing familiar material, events, and people in new ways, with the overall effect of recognizing hybrid modernity.

Students discussed the sociocultural norms and values in the third space vigorously, e.g., “I knew the Great Wall, Terracotta Warriors, etc, and China has a long history before I took the module, but with Ziqi’s video, I think I know a lot more about the modern life in China, and we have many similarities! She has picnics with her grandma, and I have barbeques with my family and friends in summer!”. Students start to compare what they see with their own cultures and experiences and draw the beauty from both sides. This point is strengthened by more comments. “Before, I heard from friends that Chinese people eat anything apart from a four-legged table, but I now think it might be true because Ziqi’s video shows that the cooking is delicate with details about color, smell, taste, and presentation, and what is more, she picks up the fresh fruits and vegetables”. Students think critically with a comparison of what they see and what they hear. A Polish student wrote “we have similar customs, e.g., we also wrap up dumplings to share with family and friends”. Another student from Bulgaria happily reflected “we have similar singing, dancing styles and the music sounds so soothing and calming, just like what I hear from my hometown”. Students connect the target culture with their home culture to establish a common ground to appreciate the common feature of both cultures. Juxtapose the target culture with students’ own culture worked well for understanding both cultures in that getting to know another culture requires more than having knowledge and information about the other culture, juxtaposition helps to understand more about one’s own culture. As can be seen, the focus of learning a target culture is not only on the differences between the two cultures but also on discovering similarities between them.

Furthermore, after the comparisons, the lecturer can broach the subject by shifting to other comparisons at higher abstraction levels, as the behaviours exhibited by different cultures may be similar, depending on the level of abstraction. At high abstraction levels, cultural similarities are more discernible compared to cultural differences. However, at low abstraction levels, it is differences, which are discernible. This echoes Üzüm et al.’s research (2020) where participants in both countries were able to critically re-evaluate their previous prejudices and stereotypical understandings of their counterparts’ cultural behaviours, values, and beliefs.

Intercultural Awareness and Intercultural Communication

Intercultural awareness and intercultural communication were the aspects that students benefitted most. Take the film *Lilting* for example, during the class, the lecturer focused on the exploration

of intercultural values from the perspective of Western-Asian Way of Life to find out the differences between Chinese and English cultures. The discussion centers around cultural knowledge used by Chinese and English people, cultural biases (ethnocentric, stereotype, discrimination, and prejudice), the details of people's perceptions about homosexuality, the way people look at kissing in public places, the way to offer food, the way people speak up in direct conversation, the process of assimilation and acculturation to a new culture, the function of an interpreter, and the most important lesson of how difficult to communicate when people have little knowledge of other language and culture. From the heated discussion around these topics among the students, the potential of films for the understanding of intercultural communication is considerable, as it offers students an intercultural experience without the cost of time to visit the countries and cultures, especially during the Pandemic. Applying films with intercultural encounters in classroom teaching gradually helped students understand the target language and the culture of that country to increase intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence (Min, 2018). The case of *Lilting* created an intercultural experience for students, served as the basis for a case analysis of cross-culture adaptation, gave meaning to cultural concepts, and enlarged powerful metaphorical images to expand classroom discussions to broader issues.

As can be seen from the discussion that most of the students agreed that the multimodal approach facilitated their cultural learning which gave a positive answer to RQ1) How effective can a multimodal approach be applied to teaching contemporary Chinese culture? Students appreciated the multimodal approach and enjoyed the learning experience. Regarding RQ 2) What insights do students gain about learning Chinese culture via a third space for intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence? Students regarded the third space as a safe place where communications with their peers and people of other cultural backgrounds enriched their initial assumptions of Chinese culture and led them to reconceptualize culture as diversity and new possibilities. The realization of cultural diversity provides evidence that communication increased students' intercultural awareness and enhanced their intercultural communication competence. Moreover, the experience of sharing and discussing together regardless of their cultural backgrounds encouraged shy and introverted students to open up and thus boosting their confidence in interacting with people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Students were interacting with each other on an equal basis and are introduced to each other's sociocultural norms and practices.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored a multimodal approach to teaching Contemporary Chinese Culture. Students' comments from module evaluation and reflective essays together with lecturers' observations demonstrate that the approach helped increase students' intercultural awareness and foster students' intercultural communicative competence by facilitating students to be more aware of the relationships between home culture and target culture, and by recognizing the variability of cultural values and practices. The study offers empirical evidence for creating a third space for students of different cultural grounds to share ideas and discuss their opinions. Students can also communicate directly with native speakers via multimodal platforms and social media, and thus the study contributes to knowledge on teaching pedagogies or strategies for teaching culture programs. Such knowledge is significant especially in the digital era to make

full use of multimodal resources. The multimodal approach encourages students to be interactants with diverse cultures rather than learners of static cultural facts. Such engagements have important implications not only for the way in which students perceive the target culture, but also for generating reflective thoughts on the beliefs, values, and ideologies underlying cultures. This study is conducted at two universities in the UK. Future research can expand to other countries to see if there are similar effects and expand to students at different levels, including middle-school students.

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