Evaluating the Role of the On-line Multimedia Teaching Materials for Upper-level Chinese Language Courses

Kun-Shan (Carolyn) Lee
Duke University

Introduction

While the lack of the target cultural environment is one of the most challenging situations for professionals who teach Chinese as a second/foreign language (CSL/CFL) in the U.S., many of us have tackled the situation by seeking authentic materials from different media to use for classroom instruction. Not only the complexity and diversity in content and topics of teaching materials, but also the quality of teaching and learning are significantly enhanced because of the internet and computer technology (Bourgerie, 2003; Chiquito & Meskill & Renjilian-Burgy, 1997; Hertel, 2003; Xie, 2004). In order to create an optimum learning environment in a non-target cultural country, many CSL/CFL teachers often find themselves rewriting an online article, compiling a vocabulary list and grammar notes, and designing a packet of exercises for that article before they finally introduce the materials to their students. Although the students, no doubt, benefit greatly from authentic learning materials like those, many teachers find that it is extremely frustrating if they lose the immediacy and value of those authentic materials when the events or issues are no longer current. This kind of situation particularly occurs if those materials are news clips or are related to contemporary cultural and social issues. If the materials are adapted from websites which have video footage, they are usually displayed for a limited time. In turn, the supplementary materials that the teachers spend long hours making can only be used a few times.

I would like to propose an alternative approach to integrating technology with authentic materials by demonstrating online multimedia teaching materials that I have created for upper-level Chinese language courses since 2000 (http://www.duke.edu/~kslee). The learners’ profile and characteristics, the learning conditions and environment and the result of the evaluations will be discussed based on the questionnaires and notes from interviews of colleagues and students who have used these online video modules.

Learner Profiles and Characteristics

Funded by Duke University Instructional Technology Incentive Grants and Arts and Sciences Research Council Research Grant, the online multimedia teaching materials is designed to foster opportunities of listening comprehension for learners whose Chinese proficiency is advanced-low and above, as measured by American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages’ Proficiency Guidelines (Breiner-Sanders et al., 2000; Buck et al., 1989). At Duke many of those students are placed into the first track of Fourth Year Chinese, entitled Chinese Economics and Society (CHN181S and CHN182S). The language background of these students in CHN181S/182S can be generally categorized as follows: 1) those who started learning the Chinese language from scratch in college and continue to study the subject after having the equivalent of three years of formal language instructions, 2) those who were born in the U.S. but whose family members spoke Mandarin with them when they were growing up, 3) those who grew up in Southeast Asia where Mandarin education is available, such as Singapore and Malaysia, 4) those whose family members do not speak any Chinese but
who went to international schools, where Mandarin instruction is available, because their families lived in East Asia (in Taiwan or Hong Kong, for example), 5) those who immigrated with their families to the U.S from China or Taiwan when they were between ages 5 and 10. The range of linguistic proficiency levels in CHN181S/182S is the most complex among all of the upper-level Chinese language courses in the Chinese program. A further complication lies with those students who come with the Chinese language proficiency in listening and speaking, but lack competence in reading and writing.

**Learning Environment and Conditions**

More than 35% of the students who take CHN181S/182S are so-called true beginners when they first start learning the language. They usually major or minor in Chinese Studies, but take the course after they have already filled the requirement. They have studied abroad in China or Taiwan, which is the only target cultural experience that they share with the rest of the students in class. They have strong motivation to continue taking Chinese until they graduate. The primary source of their learning materials has been textbooks, through which they are exposed to adjusted speech style, or so called *foreign talk or teacher talk*, most of the time when they interact with native speakers of the target language (Ellis, 1994; Krashan, 1982; Lightbown and Spada, 2000). Nevertheless, after having three years of formal language instruction and the experience of studying abroad, they are ready to perfect their Chinese through challenging and authentic learning materials which have more complex syntax and syntactic structure as well as extensive and sophisticated topics.

Although all of the students in CHN181S/182S are categorized as advanced learners, their knowledge of the Chinese language varies. The disparity in fluency and vocabulary is significant between those who started learning the language from scratch only three years ago and those who have been exposed to the language throughout their lives (Lee, 2000). The rest of the students, who come from diverse linguistic backgrounds of Chinese as mentioned above, also have strong motivation to learn the subject, but are bored by materials that are not intellectually and linguistically challenging, particularly if the materials are all simplified or modified.

While the traditional learning materials used in classroom instruction may fulfill the learners’ needs in reading and writing for the advanced level, appropriate materials for listening and speaking are often lacking. To create the opportunity of practicing speaking, the instructor meets with the students individually every other week for twenty minutes outside of class. However, a strategy-based approach to teaching listening comprehension is still unavailable. For advanced learners, listening material should no longer be just an audio version of the textbook. It must be of a caliber that accelerates learning of both the language and culture with listening strategies incorporated into instructional technology.

**Evaluation of the online teaching materials**

In response to the learning environment and the diverse background of the students, I created a series of online video modules which introduce major social phenomena and changes in modern Chinese society to provide listening opportunities and content-based instruction for upper-level Chinese language courses. These online multimedia teaching materials are entitled “Chinese Society in the New
Millennium” (Lee, 2002). The topics include “Dating on Line”, “Floating Population -- the migration of Chinese minorities in Beijing”, “Name Brand Fever,” and “Family and Marriage Outlook in China.” Each topic consists of several sub-topics. For instance for “Family and Marriage Outlook in China,” wedding business, gender roles in the family, divorce issues, youth opinions and sexuality and society are included. In ‘divorce issues,’ the content and comments about the newly revised marriage law in mainland China were included in video interviews. In ‘sexuality and society,’ issues concerning the changes of family structure in traditional and modern Chinese societies and the battered spouse hotline are covered.

Prior to watching the online video modules, students are assigned to study the main text from the textbook, so that they all have the basic knowledge of the lexical terms and syntactical structures pertinent to the subject. Towards the end of learning the main text, the students are assigned to study the online video modules as homework, based on their language backgrounds and the average study time that they are assumed to spend for this course weekly. For example, while all of the students are required to study at least one video clip from each subtopic, the students who have more language background are required to study more or all of the video clips in each subtopic. The video clips that the whole class is required to watch are usually comprehensible to the students who have the least language background in the group. The audio-visual materials are clear in terms of pronunciation, accent and content. Some interviews which contain heavy accents, such as the few in “Floating Population,” are only recommended to the learners whose Chinese language proficiency in listening and speaking are near to that of native speaker, assuming that “more advanced acquirers tend to get more complex input” (Krashan, 1982, pp.65). Nevertheless, the options are by no means excluded to other students who are interested in watching more than the required film clips. The film clips in each topic are hierarchically organized and accompanied by transcriptions (both simplified and traditional characters) and translation. Tailoring the assignments to the students based on their level of language proficiency ensure that the students receive comprehensible inputs (1982). The audio-visual content of the movies gives learners opportunities to see a person’s mouth, non-verbal language and interactions with other people on the subject matter in real life. The exposure to different Mandarin accents and mannerisms enhances learners’ understanding of the linguistic varieties in the target culture. Moreover, the non-classroom language and the online learning environment create an informal learning atmosphere which is conducive for studying, particularly helpful to the students who get anxious about being called on in class. Learning through these online video modules help alleviate learning anxiety or lower the “affective filter” to learners (1982). They can access the materials at their own pace at any time and anywhere as long as there is an internet-connected computer available.

According to the questionnaires which were completed by forty-two students who took CHN181S/182S, 71.43% of the students thought that these authentic materials definitely helped them improve their listening. Also, 71.43% of the students thought that this authentic material helped them learn about the social changes regarding the topic in contemporary Chinese society. 95.23% of the students agreed that the films and exercises were appropriate to the topic, and yet diverse enough to broaden their understanding of the topic from different perspectives. All of the forty-two students thought that these online multimedia teaching materials helped them learn the subject differently, compared with the conventional ways of teaching and learning a foreign language through textbook and classroom instruction. Students
were more motivated to learn the subject and to make significant progress not only linguistically, but also in terms of culture proficiency (Appendix).

A post-testing on students’ oral interviews showed that the students had a better understanding of the subject matter and the use of lexical terms on both listening and speaking. Originally, most of the students could only communicate their thoughts in Chinese on topics that they had studied from the textbook, but now they can elaborate their opinions not only on the same topic, but also on the relevant topics that bring perspectives and depth of understanding concerning the people, society and culture. During the discussion in class or individual sessions, the students are encouraged to apply specific syntactical structures, pragmatics, and the lexical terms that they have learned from the reading materials and the required online video modules. They are asked to observe and discuss how certain vocabulary, discourse devices, and syntactical structures are used in context as well. According to the notes from and interviews with the instructors who taught CHN181S/182S, the learners’ ability to sustain a conversation by making an argument and supporting their opinions as well as the breadth and depth of discussion are significantly increased as a result of their learning through the use of the online video modules in addition to the textbook.

One of the characteristics of these multimedia teaching materials is that I incorporated the China-related subjects taught by faculty from other departments into the topics of the video modules. The “Floating Population” was based on research done by a sociologist who specializes in the study of Chinese demography at Duke. The “Name Brand Fever” corresponded to a topic taught in Chinese Literature and Culture studies. “Family and Marriage Outlook in China” was made with a professor who taught Chinese as a foreign language in Beijing and who was also a trained sociologist working for the battered women/spouse hotline in the city. This inter-disciplinary approach has not only created a connection between the language program and the content courses taught on campus, but also made the experience of Chinese in a non-target cultural environment less marginalized or isolated. The students who took Chinese demography and Chinese Literature in translation indicated that they were able to apply knowledge gained from the materials in the language class to the China-related courses they take in other departments, and vise versa. Moreover, many of them mentioned that the materials provided various topics for them to converse with the native speakers of Chinese on campus.

**Conclusion**

Although the intent of making these online video modules was to resolve the pedagogical problem, i.e. the absence of listening materials from the target cultural environment, the goal of this project is on the content being learned, as well as on the language itself. These online video modules provide a non-classroom learning opportunity to facilitate listening comprehension for advanced learners of CFL. Supplementing the main text that they study through the conventional teaching approach, these multimedia teaching materials bring the students to the next level of learning by listening to and watching the interaction between native speakers on a broader topic in real life. The learners continue developing proficiency by reconstructing the materials that they have learned from both the main text and the video modules. Discussion in class and the individual sessions with the instructor outside of class promote the opportunity of negotiating meaning and synthesizing the knowledge that they have gained from both traditional and instructional technology approaches. The integration of China-related subjects from content courses into these online multimedia teaching materials keeps the subject interesting and relevant to what students learn in college and read from newspapers in daily life. The topics are familiar,
but not too familiar, to the students because most of the social phenomena can be found in their own society, however, the social changes and cultural differences that appear on the video modules are often implied by or imbedded in the target language. Hence, cross-cultural and a cross-linguistic comparisons are often used as a topic of discussion.

The multimedia technology has broadened the communication and shortened the distance between people who live in different countries. Not only can the materials be updated or archived as time passes, they can be easily shared with users from outside of Duke. A user name and password are created for the public. The users can access the video modules and the texts online. They can communicate their comments and suggestions through emails and questionnaires, and thus the content of the website can be enlarged and enriched because of the collaborative efforts from the users. The efficacy of teaching Chinese as a foreign language with regard to linguistic and cultural acquisition in CSL can be maximized through the integration of multimedia teaching/learning materials (Bai, 2003; Zhang, 2004; Zhang, 1998).

References


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Appendix

Question: Compared with the conventional ways of teaching and learning a foreign language, which is textbook-oriented with chalkboard demonstration etc., does this project help you learn the subject differently? Explain.

Note: All of the students respond “yes” to this question. Below is a list of comments from the students.

- Presents new aspects to learning which is refreshing and applicable. Helps me understand the current situation and practice listening.
- Because of the visual, it would be best accompanied with traditional teaching.
- This project allows students to hear more authentic speech in the native language. The exposure to authentic dialects is important.
- Videos are authentic. Exposed to “real” Chinese.
- I think the IT method is good. It gets us more interested in this interactive technology.
- The topic of this project was solely up to the student.
- I like the use of a diverse number of materials. It made the class more engaging, contemporary and balanced. It also made learning Chinese more enjoyable.
- Reading articles from the internet is helpful. But textbooks help keep the class structure more organized.
- This is a good supplement because when you learn from a book or in class, the more contact you have with the material the better. Since these videos are real speakers, they are extremely helpful.
- Makes language more relevant and alive, also aids in cultural understanding, tradition and modern language is tool, not necessarily of learning. I would like it to be paired with vocabulary. Or else I will not retain much of it.
- I think it helps a lot. To some extent, it is like interacting with a native speaker. But obviously it doesn’t completely replace one-on-one interaction. But I think it is an effective way of teaching.

- The materials present more interesting subjects.
- It was helpful to link academic subject matter to actual life experience.
- It’s a very good way to teach a language.
- It makes the material much more personal and gives a first-person point of view.
- I think that the discussions are extremely useful in developing speaking and listening. I prefer this over the traditional textbook style of teaching.
- I think it is more real and helps me to understand how the language is used in real life. This is far superior because of the reason stated above plus it is more engaging and entertaining to be able to observe real people. The increased audio-visual content of the movies helps the students learn faster than just audio types by themselves. Being able to see a person’s mouth, facial expressions, and interactions with other people is very important.
- This helped to better understand how native speakers actually speak the language. I think combing this and old (textbook) method could be perfects. P.S. it’s exciting to see the “real” side of Beijing.
- More applied for real dialogue and events. Very interactive.
- I think this will definitely give a more “real” perspective on what’s going on in China. Also, listening to those people talk let us learn more about how people speak, which is different from textbook. It gives many first hand accounts of the situation in China; something that otherwise require a trip to China (to learn).
- It’s a nice supplement but definitely cannot take the place of conventional teaching.

More interesting and more relevant than some of the textbook material, which is outdated. Good to give exposure to different accents for those thinking of traveling to China.

--this method is more beneficial for my listening