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Learning about Chinese-speaking cultures at a distance

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Learning about Chinese-Speaking Cultures at a Distance

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This chapter will focus on the challenges posed by curriculum choices and pedagogical frameworks to the study of Languages of the Wider World in the UK. These languages reflect complex linguistic and cultural realities that do not fit into the traditional constraints of language education, which raises questions about the extent to which we can address the global and local dimensions of the target languages and cultures. I will examine in particular the case of Chinese – a language family with multiple varieties and spoken by many communities in Asia and other parts of the globe – in the context of distance education. Issues surrounding language learning at a distance will be discussed, as well as the role that teachers and technology play in supporting the development of language learners' cultural awareness. While teachers can, in a face-to-face situation, exploit, expand and discuss cultural information, this possibility is very limited in distance learning. We will see how, at present, technology has taken on a major role in both formal and informal education, facilitating contact between learners and between learners and teachers (however distant they might be). For example, the Open University's beginners' Chinese course discussed here makes use of online forums to enable cultural interaction; initial examinations of these forums reveal the students to be diverse and mobile, and they also give us a sense of their cultural stances, and of the shapes of the beliefs, values and attitudes supported by their individual cultural backgrounds.

Views on Language and Cultural Diversity Within Education

Historical linguistics has indicated that, with the advent of industrialisation, increased transnational commercialisation and mobility and the influence of utilitarian ideals, a considerable demand for the teaching of modern languages in higher education emerged in nineteenth-century Britain. Language learning was, however, mainly concerned with European languages, and it was only incorporated into formal education as a complementary subject taught by means of manuals, dictionaries and grammar books.[1] Early university councils emphasised the educational approach to language learning; for instance, the University of London reports:

> Some languages will probably be studied only by those whose peculiar
> destination requires such attainment; […] But the structure of human speech
> is itself one of the worthiest objects of meditation; the comparison of various
> languages, makes each of them better understood, and illustrates the affinity
> of nations, while it enlarges and strengthens the understanding.[2]

This statement (and similar ones from this period) reveals a conceptualisation of language learning that partly resonates with current ideas. First, languages were

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[1] Gallardo Barbarroja, Matilde, 'Introducción Y Desarrollo Del Español En El Sistema Universitario Inglés Durante El Siglo XIX', ed. by Subirats Rüggeberg, Carlos, Victoria Enríquez, Emilia and Fuentes Morán, María TeresaEstudios de lingüística del español, 2003).

[2] University College London, *1827–1834: Annual Reports*, cited in Gallardo Barbarroja, 'Introducción Y Desarrollo Del Español En El Sistema Universitario Inglés Durante El Siglo XIX', p. 33.

studied out of a practical necessity for making contact with others in their language. Second, languages were seen as being spoken in 'peculiar' places and by exotic peoples, the more distant the more peculiar. Third, the most important aspect in learning a language was to understand and memorise its grammar, vocabulary and syntax. Fourth, there was a belief that a comparative study of different languages could establish similarities between nations as well as expand understanding. The specific meaning of 'understanding' is unclear here, although there is some evidence in the rest of the text that it is referring not only to the mere decoding of languages, but also to a deeper level of human understanding. In fact, the study of languages was already framed in a specific culture and it valued the understanding of the context in supporting communication. Thus, education was geared towards language acquisition, although language pedagogy started to emphasise in particular the key idea that, when we learn to communicate in other languages, we also need to be aware of the socio-cultural context. However, during this early movement towards an *en masse* foreign language education, the context presented was mostly reduced to the knowledge of national customs and presentation of stereotypes, and reflection on cultural information was not encouraged.[3]

Languages and cultures are concrete, diverse and fluid; however, in foreign language education they have been traditionally presented as abstract, uniform and unchanging. Students, teachers and materials happily assume the myth of the national philology 'One nation, one language, one culture' in the language classroom.[4] In the last decades of the twentieth century, theories of second language acquisition – which aimed at learners' linguistic proficiency[5] – and theories of language socialisation – which aimed at learners' internalisation of the social[6] – were being merged in the 'communicative competence' approach, for which the sharing, negotiation of and reflection on meanings became central to the learning activity. This communicative perspective recognised the role of affect in communication and saw that '[t]he social or interpersonal nature of communication guarantees that it is permeated by personal and socio-cultural attitudes, values and emotions'.[7] This theory, nevertheless, remained unable to transform significantly the cultural focus in the field of modern languages. Language learning made explicit both the students' language and the target communities' language and culture, but simplified the complex realities around languages. For instance, in Britain, standard English language and English culture were assumed in foreign language education.[8] Even in the practice of authentic

[3] Gallardo Barbarroja, Matilde, 'La Perspectiva Intercultural En Los Manuales Para El Aprendizaje De Lenguas Extranjeras En El Siglo XIX', in *Caminos Actuales de la Historiografía Lingüística: V Congreso Internacional de la SEHL*, ed. by A. Roldán Ruíz and others (Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 2005), pp. 429–41.

[4] For an account of this situation in language studies see, for instance, articles in Hans Lauge Hansen, ed., *Changing Philologies. Contributions to the Redefinition of Foreign Language Studies in the Age of Globalisation* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002).

[5] See, for instance, Fred R. Eckman and others, eds, *Second Language Acquisition: Theory and Pedagogy* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995).

[6] See a summary of this perspective in K. Cole and Jane Zuengler, 'Language Socialization and Second Language Learning', in *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning*, ed. by E. Hinkel (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), pp. 301–16.

[7] M. P. Breen and C. Candlin, 'The Essentials of a Communicative Curriculum in Language Teaching', *Applied Linguistics* 1 (1980), 89–112 (pp. 90–91).

[8] Roxy Harris, Constant Leung and Ben Rampton, 'Globalization, Diaspora and Language Education in England', in *Globalization and Language Teaching*, ed. by David Block and Deborah Cameron (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 29–46.(p. 45).

language input, education continued to suppress complex language and cultural realities.

The approach was considerably widened by the subsequent development of intercultural perspectives in language learning, for which a critical stance towards your own culture was understood as crucial in cross-cultural communication. Indeed, critical and ecological approaches to foreign language pedagogy questioned basic educational principles and pointed to new directions; they shifted the emphasis onto the plurality of languages and cultures, revising which of the learners' abilities should be fostered and what the measures of success should be. These positions have argued that 'educational success should perhaps be thought of in terms of both empowerment and critical awareness'.[9] They have also highlighted a number of important issues with major implications for language education: diversity within languages, hybridity of the communities in an increasingly mobile world, language power, differences in personal experiences, social justice, and so on. In short, they have argued for a balanced view of linguistic and cultural diversity within norms.[10] Such a view has been transplanted from the theory to the classroom with differing degrees of success, as success depends on many factors. As we will see, we not only need a balanced approach to learning languages and cultures, we also need to train teachers to help them attune to this approach, make it explicit to the learners and provide them with adequate activities and tools to achieve such a goal.

Addressing Glocalization in Language Learning

It is no coincidence that the promotion of difference and variation in Western theories of language learning happened at the time of an explosion of global actions and global awareness, since these very forces of globalisation have directed attention to old and new forms of diversity and hybridity in local spaces and communities. As Roland Robertson explains,

> globalization – in the broadest sense, the compression of the world – has involved and increasingly involves the creation and the incorporation of locality, processes which themselves largely shape, in turn, the compression of the world as a whole.[11]

This process in which the global and the local interact has been referred to as 'glocalization' by Robertson and others. Indeed, at present the production and consumption of linguistic and cultural information in language learning materials give rise to tensions between local and global approaches. On the one hand, languages reveal universality as well as diversity within language communities; on the other

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[9] Claire Kramsch, ed., *Language Acquisition and Language Socialization: Ecological Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 296.

[10] See, for example, Joseph Lo Bianco, and Chantal Crozet, eds., *Teaching Invisible Culture: Classroom Practice and Theory* (Melbourne: Language Australia Ltd, 2003); Claire Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Rama Kant Agnihotri, 'Multilinguality, Language and "a Language": Implications for Education', in *Globalization & Languages: Building on Our Rich Heritage*, ed. by Clare Stark (Tokyo: United Nations, 2008), pp. 158–59.

[11] Roland Robertson, 'Glocalization: Time–Space and Homogeneity–Heterogeneity', in *Global Modernities*, ed. by Mile Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson (London: Sage, 1995), pp. 25–44 (p. 40).

hand, they are learnt by a potentially global classroom in specific cultural settings. Most languages offer regional and national variations, with some – such as Arabic, Chinese, English, French, and Spanish – offering a diverse international dialectal landscape.[12] Decisions about which language variety to teach, and who will be learning it, have important educational implications, as they automatically distinguish one valid form of interaction. Answers to these issues are not straightforward in a global-local contemporary world, where plurality is not only recognised but also increasingly accessible, easily savoured in formal and informal learning. Similar questions emerge when focusing on cultures in education; the main issue is whether attention should be paid to general norms or individual constructions. Some relevant questions with respect to this are: Is it possible to create materials with a pedagogy that addresses both the global and local dimensions of the target languages and cultures? Is it possible to educate a whole global audience at once? Can universities disembed themselves from the local communities to which they belong? How can we effectively integrate a plurality of languages into our modern languages curriculum? What are realistic linguistic and cultural aims for language learners?

The latest pedagogies in language learning have started articulating meaningful answers to precisely these questions. They have made an effort to discover educational possibilities for 'developing global cultural consciousness in our learners',[13] a consciousness that emerges, as Allan Luke has suggested, through self-exploration towards transformation and even affiliation.[14] This aspiration has transformed the discipline's objectives once more, as it is not enough for language learners to mediate and speak across cultures; rather, they need to become 'glocals', i.e. individuals who are able to operate and adapt to local contexts in the global world. In our interconnected contemporary world, technology plays a key role in providing the means for the achievement of such an aim. Within formal language education, activities for self-exploration are not difficult to set up, but reaching transformation or affiliation has proved more complicated. Transformative processes take time and therefore are difficult to fit into our language curriculum as objectives. It will thus be necessary to continue exploring different pedagogical models, activities and means in order to get meaningful answers to the above questions.

Beyond European Languages and Cultures

In the European context, postmodernist efforts to decentre Europe's perception of itself 'by re-evaluating its own position in this global, postcolonial, and post-European world'[15] were resisted by a united Europe dominated by the directive of the European Community, and subsequently by the European Union, where political and educational support was focused on European languages. Florian Coulmas has

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[12] There is some debate about the concepts of dialect, language and variety. Traditional discourses from different languages have adopted their own ways to describe these linguistic phenomena; here, I am going to use 'dialects' and 'varieties' as synonyms for each other, i.e. as two of the many forms in which a language is expressed and mutually understood.

[13] B. Kumaravadivelu, *Cultural Globalization and Language Education* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 177.

[14] For an argument for transformation, see for instance Allan Luke, 'Two Takes on the Critical', in *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning*, ed. by B. Norton and K. Toohey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 21–29.

[15] Manuela Guilherme, *Critical Citizens for an Intercultural World: Foreign Language Education as Cultural Politics* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2002). p. 92.

commented on the issue of language policy in the early European Community, one of whose areas of attention involved language education for citizens of its member states and whose foreign language teaching objectives included 'offering all pupils the opportunity of learning at least one other Community language'.[16] These policies, together with the 'monolingual ideology' attributed to Britain,[17] the perceived difficulties in learning non-European languages, and the absence of a clear connection between language learning, mobility and global communication have resulted in a persistent lack of attention to Languages of the Wider World until the twenty-first century. Only in the past few years, some attempts have been made to engage in the promotion of non-European languages and cultures. In 2003, the European Language Council (ELC)[18] recommended the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity among undergraduates of all disciplines as central to the process of integration and participation.[19] In a report on the diversity of languages taught in member countries by the European Commission, it is recognised that '[t]he main motivating factor for expanding the study of languages is clearly language prestige: the perceived value of a language for (upward) social mobility'.[20] Explicit references to multilingualism beyond European languages appear, for instance, in the Council of the European Union conclusions in 2008, among which it is stated that,

> with a view to promoting economic growth and competitiveness, it is important for Europe also to maintain a sufficient knowledge base in non-European languages with a global reach. At the same time, efforts should be made to uphold the position of European languages on the international stage.[21]

More specifically in Britain, in the final report and recommendations of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry in 2000, there was a call for a wider range of languages to be spoken by the UK workforce.[22] In this report, from the point of view of the business-world, Arabic and Chinese were mentioned as an emerging need. Then, in 2005, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) identified some non-European languages as strategically important and vulnerable subjects of study, i.e. 'subjects that add to the UK's political and cultural capital' and whose supply and

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[16] Florian Coulmas, 'European Integration and the Idea of the National Language', in *A Language Policy for the European Community: Prospects and Quandaries*, ed. by Florian Coulmas (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1991), pp. 1–44 (p. 9).

[17] See, for instance, Michael Stubbs, ibid., pp. 215–39.

[18] The ELC is an independent organisation that has, since 1997, been working on the issues of a multilingual and multicultural Europe from the point of view of higher education. Some of its efforts have been put into two complementary network projects supported by the European Commission: the Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages III (TNP3) and the European Network for the Promotion of Language Learning Among All Undergraduates (ENLU).

[19] European Commission, 'Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004–2006', in *Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions* (Europe: European Language Council, 2003).

[20] Miquel Strubell and others, *The Diversity of Language Teaching in the European Union: A Report to the European Commission Directorate General for Education & Culture*, Miquel Strubell and others, >http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/eu-language-policy/docs/diversity_en.pdf, p. 8 [accessed 22 April 2010].

[21] The Council of the European Union, 'Council Conclusions of 22 May 2008 on Multilingualism', *Official Journal C140* (2008), 14–15.

[22] Nuffield Languages Inquiry, *Languages: The Next Generation* (London: Nuffield Foundation, 2000)

demand are threatened.[23] Among these subjects, mention was made of a group of minority languages, including Chinese, Arabic and Japanese.

Chinese Education at a Distance

In the past few years, Chinese (Mandarin) has been among the most popular language choices in the West, although the number of its students has remained relatively low compared to European languages. The 2001 Marshall report indicates that, in the United Kingdom, in the academic year 1998/99 very few higher education and further education institutions were offering degrees in Chinese.[24] Since then, a demand for learning Chinese has seen an increase in offerings and enrolments from first degree undergraduates, university language centres, Institution-Wide Language Programmes (IWLPs), local education authorities (LEAs) as well as the Asset Languages Assessment Scheme (developed as part of the National Languages Strategy in England).[25]

The provision of education in Chinese requires similar pedagogical decisions to those of other modern languages, such as the selection of appropriate objectives, levels of competence and content, pedagogy, learning materials, and learning tools. So when designing the syllabus and materials for a beginners' Chinese course in the context of distance learning at the UK's Open University (OU), these, and the additional matters related to language education at a distance, had to be given considerable thought. Indeed, learning languages at a distance adds specific challenges to the materials needed for the development of students' linguistic and cultural communicative competences, such as ensuring appropriate support with full explanations and answer keys to every activity, facilitating spoken outputs and spoken interaction, and opportunities for critical cultural reflection. Additional issues arise with respect to the specific nature of the language; in the case of Chinese, it involves teaching a different script and tone pronunciation.

During the creation of a beginners' Chinese course, one of the immediate needs was to ensure an appropriate benchmark for this initial level. The Department of Languages at the OU had been implementing the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR)[26] for the teaching of European languages, which has become a key reference for defining levels of attainment in language skills using a descriptors scale. However, linguistic competence was conceived with European (alphabetical) languages in mind, and its application to the Languages of the Wider World was therefore straightaway found to be limited. The framework acknowledges this difficulty with a few scattered references to some different aspects of non-European languages, but does not suggest appropriate levels for them. With this need in mind, two important initiatives have

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[23] HEFCE Chief Executive's Strategically Important Subjects Advisory Group, *Strategically Important and Vulnerable Subjects* (Bristol: HEFCE, 2005), p. 9.

[24] Keith Marshall, *Survey of Less Specialist Language Learning in UK Universities (1998–1999)* (Southampton: University Council for Modern Languages, 2001).

[25] A similar growth-pattern has been experienced in secondary education in England, Wales and Scotland. The British Association of Chinese Studies has mentioned, among the factors influencing the rise in schools: the independent sector, town-twinning schemes, the specialist language colleges since 1996, and the organised language assistant support from the British Council.

[26] Council of Cultural Co-operation, Modern Languages Division, Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

taken place elsewhere which offer guidance to higher education institutions. In the United States, the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning have recently incorporated guidelines for the teaching of non-European languages including Chinese.[27] These are comprehensive interrelated sets of standards for communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. More recently, the Office of Chinese Language Council International has worked on the objectives and content of an international curriculum for Chinese language education (ICCLE). [28] Their guidelines are based on the CEFR as well as the *Chinese Language Proficiency Scales for Speakers of Other Languages*, and propose five stages, i.e. levels of attainment, for knowledge (phonology, character and word, grammar and function, theme and discourse), skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing), strategies (affective, learning, communicative, resource, interdisciplinary) and cultural awareness (cultural knowledge, cultural understanding, cross-cultural awareness and global awareness). Here it is understood that, while these strategies support learners' efficiency in learning independently, language and culture skills and knowledge are the ultimate goal of the learning. These ICCLE and US benchmark statements guided the creation of the beginners' Chinese language course at the OU, which is based on communicative and cross-cultural awareness aims.

In the beginners' Chinese course described here, language and culture appear as a unity but, at the same time, as distinctive aspects of the learning experience. Although a dynamic relationship between these two elements is not uncommon in current language courses, there are a number of issues that are rarely addressed in Chinese taught as a foreign language. Mandarin Chinese in its standardised modern form – and occasionally Cantonese – is the Chinese variety most commonly taught. Textbooks and teachers take recourse to maps of the global reach of Mandarin in what seems more of a marketing strategy than an educational one. Although the selection of a language form is a practical and functional choice, it nevertheless has a political significance, as it is chosen for its official status in the world and therefore the most powerful form of communication. Language educators and the authors of teaching materials seem to be fearful of making explicit mention of language complexities, avoiding references to the real, fluid nature of the language varieties and their related cultures. Chinese is rarely presented, particularly at the *ab initio* (absolute beginner) level, as a family of languages – a language with many unintelligible spoken varieties (or dialects), a common written script with two varieties (traditional and simplified), and several systems of transcribing sounds into the Roman alphabet (such as pinyin); not to mention the fact that six per cent of the population in China speak non-Chinese languages.[29] In addition, it has been our experience in the recruitment and monitoring of language tutors, that they often display embarrassment and make an effort to hide their specific accents during lessons, if they assume that they do not comply with the expected norm. It seems that language continues to be conceptualised in language education and its associated materials in a simplified almost unreal globalized manner, and so is culture. Particular local cultures thereby easily become a 'national culture', and national cultures are then transformed into global ones. Chinese-

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[27] American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, *Standards in Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (Yonkers: National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006).

[28] Office of Chinese Language Council International, *International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2008).

[29] Read about these aspects in the introduction to the OU course for Chinese beginners, Open University, *L197 第一步 Dì Yī Bù: Beginners' Chinese*, Book 1 (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2009).

speaking communities become 'China', disregarding Taiwan, Singapore and other speakers in South-East Asia and America (north and south). Cultural information is reduced to a few theme-related notes.

One of the key pedagogical principles related to dealing with other cultures is critical self-reflection, where we exercise understanding other cultures by thinking about our own, and vice versa. Identifying commonalities and differences means going beyond cultural knowledge and understanding; it brings cross-cultural awareness. So it has been argued that

> [p]edagogical approaches and techniques that help learners to reflect objectively on their own culture are especially important because language teachers and learners need to be sharply aware of their point of departure in culture learning.[30]

The capacity for reflection needs knowledge, skills and attitudes that support analysis and understanding. These pedagogical ideas closely follow one of the models of intercultural competence most widely used in language teaching, proposed by Michael Byram in the late '90s, which defined a set of interrelated factors or '*savoirs*' as integral to the formation of intercultural speakers. Byram recommended the development of language learners' intercultural communicative competence, which consists of the skills of interpreting and relating, of discovery and interaction, of knowledge, critical cultural awareness and attitudes.[31] As previously mentioned, a new version of this critical cultural reflexivity has set more ambitious goals: it places the emphasis on the development of a global consciousness – or global awareness, as referred to in the ICCLE – and therefore suggests a shift of pedagogical focus with five priorities:

> [F]rom target language community to targeted cultural community, from linguistic articulation to cultural affiliation, from cultural information to cultural transformation, from passive reception to critical reflection, and from interested text to informed context.[32]

There is no consensus, though, on how to achieve this. While for some it is important that in foreign language education we are explicit in our cultural approaches and practice of critical ethnography,[33] others favour indirect and 'small-scale interactive models',[34] or have even argued for emphasising 'pragmatic and linguistic universals, and psychological/social typologies, while limiting the focus to finding and interpreting differences'.[35] What seems clear is that language learning theory is pushing towards a glocalized education – i.e. an education that deals with the global and local aspects of the languages and cultures, with respect not only to the target cultural communities but also to the student community itself, which in the context of a distance education has a diverse origin (as could be the case in a traditional

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[30] Mike Levy, 'Culture, Culture Learning and New Technologies: Towards a Pedagogical Framework', *Language Learning and Technology* 11 (2007), 104–27 (p. 107).

[31] Michael Byram, *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1997), p. 34.

[32] B. Kumaravadivelu, *Cultural Globalization and Language Education*, p. 231.

[33] A practice that takes into account 'historical, political, sociological, and other macrocontextual factors that influence a person's cultural life', ibid. p. 183.

[34] M. Guest, 'A Critical "Checkbook" for Culture Teaching and Learning', *ELT Journal* 56 (2002), 154–61, p. 157.

[35] Guest, ibid., p. 160.

classroom), but also remains physically dispersed. The student population in this context is characteristically mobile and situated in varied, sometimes constantly changing, settings; moving from their places of origin to other national or international spaces. In the United Kingdom there is a long history of interaction, especially in urban areas, between diverse communities, due to a flow of migrant populations from around the world; opportunities for local cross-cultural contact in social and educational contexts have therefore been available. Activities within the confines of an institution, and within national borders, have been identified as 'intracultural', but this label loses its sense in current educational settings. As Phipps and Gonzalez have suggested, '[i]t is perfectly possible to act as an intercultural being without going abroad', because being intercultural, as they define it, is also pertinent in your immediate surroundings, in your local place 'down the road'.[36] The distinction between what counts as intracultural or intercultural might therefore no longer be as clear. Formal classroom education in a global world, but more specifically distance education, faces the challenge of the unpredictability of learners' identities and competences in an increasingly diverse and mobile student population. For instance, mobile learners might have a more developed intercultural communicative competence with their acquired language, and social skills of one or more different cultural settings; or heritage students, i.e. individuals with a historical and personal connection with the language.[37]

The OU beginners' Chinese course aims at widening students' expectations with regard to the subject. Materials created for the course explicitly acknowledge the diverse socio-cultural reality of Chinese languages and cultures, and encourage students to engage in critical social constructivism in order to understand that what they know is socially and culturally determined. Cultural notes in the main course books, such as the one cited in the figure below, direct learners' attention to cultural knowledge about aspects of Chinese-speaking communities pertinent to the theme studied, with the aim to uncover some of those aspects for them, incite their curiosity and support their understanding. They are also accompanied by explicit questions (entitled 想一想 *Xiǎng yi xiǎng*, 'Have a Think') that ask them to examine and evaluate their own habits, cultural context, ideas and conceptions, whatever they are.[38]

Culture: Popular ball games

There is evidence that the earliest form of football was a military exercise dating back to the second and third centuries BC in China. The exercise was called 蹴鞠 *cù jú* (lit. kick ball) and consisted of kicking a leather ball filled with feathers and hair through an opening, measuring just 30–40cm in width, into a small net fixed on to long bamboo canes. This early version of football was popular for a long time, until the Qing Dynasty in the middle of the 17th century. Modern football was introduced to China in the early part of the 20th century and has since steadily grown in popularity, as both a participation and spectator sport.

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[36] Mike Gonzales and Alison Phipps, *Modern Languages: Learning and Teaching in an Intercultural Field* (London: Sage, 2004), p. 115

[37] For an account of the origin and problems around the concept of 'heritage students' see, for instance, Guadalupe Valdés, 'Bilingualism, Heritage Language Learners, and SLA Research: Opportunities Lost or Seized?', *The Modern Language Journal,* 89 (2005), 410–26.

[38] Open University, *L197 第一步 Dì Yī Bù: Beginners' Chinese.*

In modern China, perhaps the two most popular ball games are table tennis (乒乓球 *pīngpāngqiú*) and badminton (羽毛球 *yǔmáoqiú* lit. feather ball). In almost every school in China, there are table tennis facilities. Basketball is also very popular among young people, and millions watch American NBA matches on TV. In Taiwan, baseball (棒球 *bàngqiú*) is hugely popular.

想一想 *Xiǎng yi xiǎng*

What are the most popular sports in your country, and why do you think they are so popular? Part of the reason for the popularity of table tennis and badminton in China is that the equipment is relatively inexpensive and does not take up much space. Broadcasting has been another important influence on sport in China, boosting the popularity of football and basketball in particular. Have any sports benefited from increased television exposure in your country?[39]

It is evident that these cultural awareness activities are limited in their capacity to transform students' positions. They are also presented through the medium of English, although references to the UK context are avoided to allow for a more individualised approach for students from other localities. In addition, they are just a formative requirement (i.e. not part of any assessment), so that students might choose to ignore them, or address them without contemplating any other viewpoints. Thus, in order to encourage the contrasting of positions (as explained later in this chapter), it was decided to use learners' answers to these points in an online forum.

The Role of Teachers and Technology

In a traditional formal context, teachers play a key role in how students learn, understand and reflect on the languages and cultures studied. In the classroom, the role of the teacher as mediator of the culture is crucial. The ICCLE specifies that

> Chinese language teachers are expected, in view of age and cognitive ability
> of the learner, to expand both the content and scope of Chinese culture as

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[39] Image: Table tennis on the Guangxi Normal University campus, Guilin. Reproduced with the kind permission of the photographer, Quian Kan (© Quian Kan 2009).

well as the horizons of the learner, especially its importance, contribution and function in a multitude of cultures.[40]

But the fact that, in a face-to-face situation, teachers can thoroughly use, expand and discuss relevant pieces of cultural information with their local classrooms, does not mean that they are willing to embrace this task, especially to the deep ethical level required for the development of students' intercultural and global competences.[41]

In the past decades, technology has played a major role in supporting cross-cultural awareness in learners, not only formally but also informally. Computer-mediated communication brings into contact (with more or less difficulty) geographically distant people making use of an increasingly wide variety of tools. Technology has disposed of the constant presence of the teacher, who can just set individual or communal tasks and monitor them in a virtual space that de-emphasises time and enlarges spaces. On the one hand, emerging technologies have the capacity to support learners' real-time synchronous contact, but also liberate them from it. They provide means by which time can be flexible, and restrictions less pressurising than within the classroom. On the other hand, spatial boundaries have been reconfigured from geographical borders to digital ones. The '"soft architecture" of the network'[42] has replaced the tangible space of the classroom and the need for travelling. But some hard barriers remain: although computers and other mobile technology have connected learners' and teachers voices, they have also become the land that separates their bodies. With new communication technologies, the possibility of remote contact makes the need for displacement redundant. Flexible and mobile technologies are reducing direct physical contact between students, and between them and their teachers. The real impact of this is still unknown. In distance education, congregation in common physical spaces was already minimised for many reasons (e.g. geographical distance, disabilities, special circumstances); so, in this context, technology in fact has become a space that has considerably increased and improved contact and interaction between distance learners and teachers. Mobile technology has helped to overcome distance learning students' mobility. Distance no longer determines *when* communication can take place or with *whom*, it only influences *how* – as, depending on the technology we might use, we may interact orally or in writing, synchronously or asynchronously. So for distance education what currently seems key is the learning modality that we choose to establish (human or machine) interaction.

The majority of recent efforts concerning the facilitation of language acquisition and awareness, and the development of cultural awareness or intercultural competence, have made use of communication (and information) technologies. Email, forums, wikis, chats, blogs, instant messaging, and conferencing tools have been used in the past few decades for the purposes of telecollaboration across institutions and countries, to help learners interact with other target language users. Multiple educational projects with linguistic and/or cultural aims have tested the effectiveness of asynchronous exchanges versus synchronous ones, as well as the different types of

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[40] Office of Chinese Language Council International, *International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education*, p. iv.

[41] For an account of language teachers and the extent to which they are ready to assume responsibilities for teaching culture and intercultural competences, see Inma Álvarez and Cecilia Garrido, 'Language Teacher Education for Intercultural Understanding', *European Journal of Teacher Education* 29 (2006), 163–79.

[42] Michael A. Peters, *Poststructuralism, Politics and Education* (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 1996), p. 100.

communication, from experiences with texts to videoconferencing. A common tendency has been to concentrate on the facilitation of interaction between students who would need to act as both native speakers and language learners, in order to provide opportunities for authentic intercultural encounters. An additional characteristic of these exchanges is that most of them have aimed at developing students' intercultural communicative competence through set tasks.[43] However, it has been pointed out that communication has been mainly established between speakers of European languages: 'very few studies have been conducted to explore students' intercultural learning in less-commonly-taught foreign languages classes'.[44] This reflects, of course, the traditional lack of educational provision for the Languages of the Wider World. Only in very recent years has this situation started to change.

For the OU beginners' Chinese course, a blended course model was designed according to which students learn languages with print and online materials, and a link between these two is established in a virtual learning environment. The course was offered for the first time in November 2009, lasting a period of eleven months; comments here refer to the production process during the previous months of 2009 and student's participation during the first few months of the course. The virtual learning environment guides learners through their weeks of study, and offers them print and digital resources, interactive activities, as well as a few electronic tools (flashcards, audio recordings, glossaries, and forums). Of interest here is that learners encounter the cultural notes in the materials in two different forms: in their textbooks, but also on their course web sites, with a link to an internal, informal forum where they can share their reflections and opinions. The learners' task is to understand the global dimension of Chinese and examine the dimensions of their own culture and personal attitudes.

Discussing Culture in an Online Forum

The online forum gives students the opportunity to engage in social activity, despite being in distant places. But most importantly, the forum becomes a learning zone under construction that is slowly put together by different learners in a variety of locations at any time; a student in a particular locality is in contact with students in other localities, and they thus become a widely localised group.

Discussion forums are 'asynchronous forms of web-based discourse in which communication is public and organized within topic areas'.[45] Participation is therefore one-to-many and immediately visible to any other participant in the forum. Being a written medium, it is also characterised for its permanency and might invite its users to choose their words carefully. Threads display a string of consecutive responses to, or commentaries on, a topic and are automatically displaced to the top of the forum by the active participation of other learners. They are the most popular tool of the virtual learning environment at the OU in the United Kingdom. In the context of distance

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[43] See a review of projects in this area in Robert O'Dowd, ed., *Online Intercultural Exchange: An Introduction for Foreign Language Teachers* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2007).

[44] Li Jin, 'Using Instant Messaging Interaction (IMI) in Intercultural Learning', in *Mediating Discourse Online*, ed. by Sally Sieloff Magnan (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2008), pp. 275–304 (p. 276). Other examples of studies with Chinese speakers can be found, for example, in Wan Shun Eva Lam, 'Second Language Socialization in a Bilingual Chat Room: Global and Local Considerations', *Language Learning and Technology* 8 (2004), 44–65.

[45] Anja Wanner, 'Creating Comfort Zones of Orality in Online Discussion Forums', in *Mediating Discourse Online*, ed. by Sally Sieloff Magnan, pp. 125–49 (p. 127).

learning, a forum has the advantage of being an environment for asynchronous participation, where a student can go, whenever is convenient, to read the contributions of others and add their own. It allows students to keep their autonomy as learners, but at the same time feel part of a larger community of learners with a common interest. It also provides a space in which to exchange factual information, negotiate ideas, present personal viewpoints. In addition, internal or restricted discussion forums, such as the one used in the OU course, eliminate the anxieties associated with communication with a cultural 'other' in their native language, since there is no pressure to produce target language (although this naturally appears). This is particularly important to consider at the beginners' level, when students lack the linguistic knowledge required to communicate effectively and meaningfully. Levy has described the controlled environment provided by a learning forum as a space that gives learners opportunities to rehearse 'cultural practices of the real forum'. [46] However, the aim of the closed forum does not need to be to train students to operate in the 'real' ones they might find outside their learning environment in the World Wide Web. Closed formal educational forums could be used mainly to elicit initial reflections on the students' local circumstances and identities; and their use therefore does not need to be primarily that of a technical and social training-ground for using interactive tools in a global space (although, evidently, these skills could be acquired in the process), but rather be a step in self-awareness – a key aspect for the students' future interaction across cultures, in whatever medium they may need to interact.

Cognitive psychology and group dynamics are interesting areas of research that can inform pedagogical decisions in language learning. Findings about the benefits of discussion seem particularly relevant here, as they highlight how discussion can help learners improve their retention of information, thinking skills, motivation, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, self-esteem, and awareness of others. Bligh has argued, more specifically, that discussion encourages active participation which can help develop attitudes and values. He has pointed out, moreover, that there is evidence that discussions without a tutor can be more effective than presentation methods.[47]

For the above reasons, discussion forums were selected for the OU beginners' Chinese course to allow students to develop their cultural awareness. In the forum, the teacher's role is dissipated through a set of prompting questions related to pertinent and topical cultural aspects (e.g. hospitality, names and titles, spoken dialects, numbers, sayings, lunar calendar, etc). The culture forum's emphasis is mainly on offering time and space for discovery, for self-awareness grown from an awareness of the other. The intention is that students generate learning content relevant to their identities and cultural backgrounds, but at the same time make connections with Chinese-speaking communities, and appreciate and value them. As Phipps and Gonzalez have explained, the capacity to acquire a language is the product of a desire to understand.[48]

Students are encouraged to post their reflective answers and discuss them with their peers. All threaded discussion items also display individual contributors' names, and the date and time of posting. The forum is moderated and is open to students and tutors, and both have the opportunity to open new threads. The culture forum has been accepted as an informal space and postings are short, spontaneous, chat-like interventions. It should be mentioned that as yet only a very small number of students

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[46] Levy, 'Culture, Culture Learning and New Technologies', p. 118.
[47] Donald Bligh, *What's the Point in Discussion?* (Exeter: Intellect, 2000), p. 14.
[48] Gonzalez and Phipps, *Modern Languages*, p. 104.

engage with it, but those who do so go beyond answering the set questions, and they share texts, internet links and images; and some even declare that they record the most interesting material in a diary for future reference. This low usage might be due to the fact that the forum is not tutor-led, or part of formal assessment. It also seems that the informal nature of the cultural discussions prompts learners to behave as in other open forums, as if this was not part of their studies. Evidently, students' lack of engagement is not educationally desirable, and it will be interesting to investigate the reasons behind it once the course has ended.

It is still premature to establish conclusions at this stage, as the course has, at the time of writing, only been running for a few months. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the convergence of the students' multiple locations has the power to create intercultural encounters. Initial participation in the forum has revealed very different locations and origins, and numerous interpersonal comparisons, exposing commonalities and differences within the group. Students openly declare:

> 'I'm in Beijing'
> 'Here in Germany […]'
> 'I'm American […] I worked in Eritrea'
> 'A long time ago I went from England to Hong Kong to run a company training course'
> 'When I was helping at an English Corner in a Beijing University'
> 'When I moved to Scotland […]'
> 'In Belgium, such a small country, we have 3 languages'
> 'Tomorrow I will spend the day in China town in London'

Contributions to the forum already show the many different ways in which learners position themselves in the cultural space, ways that are also closely linked to their background and different stages of cross-cultural development. For instance, some responses seem to attempt to justify their author's manner of thinking and make their cultural habits and traditions seem natural and normal, while others offer more tentative and contrastive approaches. Apart from individual positions, there are also indications of the construction of a collective identity, as distance learners of Chinese. In fact, it can be argued that in such a virtual medium learners' identifications, alliances, coalitions, groupings might transcend immediate obstacles that face-to-face education cannot avoid. Finally, there is also evidence of an interest in discovery through mutual learning.

It is evident that the forum meets its primary objectives of exposing contrasting points of view and facilitating exchanges, although this has only happened on a small scale so far. It is still too early to ascertain the true extent of the impact of cultural discussions on learners. It will be interesting to examine whether, through this type of activity, attitudes become more flexible or are even transformed. Debriefings, at which participants have a chance to express their opinions on what they have learned and how, have been suggested as a possible means for unpacking contributions.[49] Such an engagement with the perspectives shared was, however, not incorporated into the course's original pedagogy, though it will be considered in the future, once all the evidence is collected and has been analysed fully.

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[49] Clarissa Menezes Jordão, 'English as a Foreign Language, Globalisation and Conceptual Questioning', *Globalisation, Societies & Education* 7 (2009), 95–107 (p. 103).

Conclusion

The customary dispersion of the locations of individuals in distance learning has, in fact, become a convenient aspect for students' cultural interaction, since the global and the local dimensions granted provide the differentiated views that they need for the development of their discovery-, relating-, and critical cultural awareness-skills that might help to transform their positions and attitudes. At present – whether interculturally orientated activities take place in a face-to-face environment, in telecollaboration or in other computer-mediated environments – we cannot be certain about how cultural information and sensitivity is processed in language learning. More conclusive evidence about the impact of computer-mediated communication activities will be possible with longitudinal studies, studies that follow the development and pace of students' critical cultural awareness from beginners' to advanced levels. It will be also of great interest to contrast non-interventionist approaches, i.e. tutorless tasks, with more guided activities, as well as to establish how linguistic and cultural skills activated in one medium transfer to others (e.g. whether cultural positionings in the discussion forums are consistent with positionings in face–to–face lessons or responses to assignments).

Nevertheless, the challenges encountered during the development of a Chinese language course for beginners at a distance highlight many of the current issues in language and culture education, particularly when related to global and non-European languages. Despite the 'global awareness'-objectives suggested in recent pedagogies, current materials, methods and teachers maintain global ideals that force language learning to become standardised and cultural awareness to carry on in a separate compartment. In practice, we continue standing against the same wall. If the ultimate intention of language education is to enable students to be competent as glocal intercultural speakers in as many languages as they can learn, and to feel at ease in any formal or informal environment in a national or international context, educators cannot hide from the complex realities that this aim implies. It seems that we still need a strategic move in language education, glocalizing the presentation of languages in materials, teacher-training courses and interactive activities.

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