



Cultural Competence in Chinese Language Education: Discussing the Importance of Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Cultural competence plays a significant role in successful language education. Studies have shown that culturally sensitive pedagogy enables teachers to connect language to an accurate cultural context, preventing misappropriate language use. This study examined the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity in teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

Materials and Methods: Data was collected using observation, interviews, and systematic reviews of academic journals. The classroom observation was selected because it provides first-hand data about how educators teach the Chinese language. The researchers also observed the impact of cultural awareness on teaching methods and outcomes. Interviews were conducted using open-ended questionnaires to obtain the benefits of cultural awareness and sensitivity in teaching the Chinese language. The systematic review helped in extracting data from the previous studies. The inductive and deductive thematic analyses were conducted based on the guidance from Byram's intercultural competence framework.

Results: The findings showed that cultural awareness and sensitivity are important in teaching the Chinese language because they improve critical cultural awareness, linguistic competency, and the ability of language educators to translate and communicate effectively. The various elements of linguistic competency that teachers demonstrate include comprehension, connotation, convention, and conditioning.

Conclusion: Cultural awareness and sensitivity also help language educators empower learners and enhance their capacity to become better intercultural communicators. The paper suggests that Chinese language teachers should make regular visits to China to enhance their cultural awareness. Educators should also try various strategies, including double translation, comparison, and situational settings to integrate cultural awareness into their teachings.

Keywords: Cultural Awareness; Cultural Sensitivity; Foreign Language Teaching; Intercultural Competence; Cultural Knowledge

Introduction

Culturally responsive pedagogy indicates a paradigm shift toward greater awareness of the inseparability of language and culture. It also empowers and prepares learners to become effective intercultural communicators (Huang et al., 2019). Teaching the Chinese language (Mandarin) in Thailand or any other country may be difficult for a teacher who cannot connect words taught in the classroom to the specific cultural context (Kim, 2020; Li, 2020; Lai & Tai, 2021). For semantics and pragmatism, educators must reflect on cultural context to make words more meaningful to the learners (Gong et al., 2020; Kim, 2020). Moreover, students build most of their vocabulary or lexicon from the language's cultural context. Cultural awareness prevents inappropriate language use or placing words within an erroneous cultural context (Peng et al., 2020). The inseparable bond between language and culture makes it difficult for teachers to succeed without paying attention to the inherent cultural values and beliefs that influence how people speak and behave.

Background

Cultural awareness is about understanding how people acquire their culture, beliefs, and personal identities. Cultural awareness also refers to consciousness or sensitivity to the differences and similarities between cultures, especially when communicating or interacting with individuals from various cultural backgrounds (Yang, 2019; Wen et al., 2018; Zhang & Zhou, 2019). The study examines how cultural awareness affects language teachers when teaching Chinese language. Being a key consideration in





language acquisition, cultural awareness is difficult to ignore when discussing basic strategies that educators can use to teach the Chinese language to a foreign audience (Kim, 2020; Hu & Dai, 2021). For instance, most pronunciations and choice of words are closely associated with cultural competence. These strategies outline what teachers can do in the classrooms to avoid cultural-related mistakes that may affect the language acquisition process (Shadiev & Yang, 2020; Wen et al., 2018; Kim, 2020). Examples of the strategies include studying the language and understanding the context in which words are used to generate meaning.

Significance of the Study

The problem in this study is the lack of cultural awareness and how it affects language educators. This problem is significant because it affects thousands of teachers who are teaching the Chinese language across the world. Chinese language has a growing popularity around the globe due to China's expansion of trade relations with many countries globally. Findings from this study may assist thousands of teachers in improving the pedagogical approach and assisting many learners in acquiring the language. The study also contributes to the growing literature regarding the Chinese language and effective approaches that teachers can use in the classrooms to teach foreign languages.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. The study also plans to achieve other objectives, including the following:

1. To explain what constitutes culturally aware and sensitive pedagogy about teaching Mandarin as a foreign language.
2. To assist foreign or international students in understanding and adapting to Chinese culture as contained in the language.
3. To suggest how educators can achieve cultural competence and use it to integrate intercultural activities into language teaching.

To understand the impact of intercultural activities on intercultural competence development to the learners and teachers.

Literature Review

This study examines the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Studies have shown that learning a foreign language loses substance without a proper understanding of the target culture (Lai & Tai, 2021). For instance, it is difficult for a language educator in Thailand to teach Mandarin without proper reference and reflection of Chinese culture. Cultural context applies to verbal and non-verbal communication, sign language, behaviors and etiquette, value orientation, and interpersonal relationships (Shadiev & Yang, 2020; Yang, 2019; Kim, 2020). Moreover, language vocabularies often evolve based on new developments in culture and social transformations (Gong et al., 2020). For instance, some vocabularies were popular during the Qin Dynasty but would be considered offensive in modern communication. Educators who are not aware of such transformations in language may not understand the specific cultural context that affects communication (Huang et al., 2019). It may also take longer for students to achieve intercultural communicative competence in classrooms where authentic contact with the target culture is lacking.

Peng et al. (2020) define cultural awareness as an understanding of one's culture or the target culture and its influence on the language. Foreign language educators need to understand the target culture and its impact on verbal and non-verbal communication. Lai & Tai (2021) do not find a significant difference between cultural knowledge and awareness when it comes to language education. The researchers believe that language educators should spend some time with the target culture to understand the type of knowledge they should share with the learners (Peng et al., 2020). Cultural awareness provides a comprehensive analysis of words to enable learners to understand how a single word can be used in different contexts to generate the desired meaning (Gong et al., 2020; Yang, 2019; Wen et al., 2018). For instance, the word "hot" (热) can be used to describe high temperatures or spicy food. One can use the word



“hot” in a restaurant to describe spicy food rather than the atmospheric temperature. Putting words in their right context is one of the benefits of cultural awareness that every language educator cannot ignore.

Cultural sensitivity mainly applies to the appropriate use of language to avoid offensive behaviors. Peng et al. (2020) explain how words used in certain contexts can be offensive to native or foreign speakers. For instance, Mandarin speakers can use words such as “bad egg” (坏蛋) to describe a decomposing egg due to bacteria or mold. However, when used in anger during heated arguments, the phrase “bad egg” may describe someone dishonest or unreliable. The words can become offensive if the person being described as dishonest believes they are being wrongly accused (Yang, 2019). Cultural sensitivity also enables educators to avoid stereotypes that spread misleading beliefs about the Chinese people (Zhang & Zhou, 2019). As part of being culturally competent, educators should understand how to make language learning more educative, enjoyable, and empowering (Handtke et al., 2019). Moreover, culturally sensitive language education develops learners into competent intercultural communicators who understand the impact of their words on the listeners.

While most language educators understand the importance of cultural awareness in pedagogy, the current debate is on how cultural competency can be achieved. Language educators have also raised concerns about the glaring gaps between evidence and practice caused by the limited research in this crucial field (Chong & Reinders, 2020). Most educators have realized that moving beyond the theoretical concepts can be challenging with limited support from the institutions where they work (Lai & Tai, 2021). This study responds to the concerns raised by educators by examining what constitutes cultural awareness and sensitive pedagogy, explaining the benefits, and suggesting how educators can achieve the required competencies. The paper also explains potential issues that educators may encounter while trying to achieve the desired language competencies. The author should provide the background of the study/manuscript along with the importance of the research problems using the simple, clear, and concise written language. If the abbreviations of any terms will be used, the author needs to previously state the full version of them in the manuscript before the use of those terms’ abbreviations.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is Byram’s intercultural competence in language teaching and learning. Byram provides a framework that guides language educators and curriculum developers on the importance of cultural competence in language teaching and learning (Peng et al., 2020). The conceptual framework contains three categories as shown in *Figure 1* below. In the first category, Byram divides intercultural communication competence into linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies (Peng et al., 2020). Linguistic competency examines how cultural awareness improves educators’ and learners’ linguistic knowledge and skills (Li & Pitkänen, 2018; Yang, 2019). The sociolinguistic competency examines how learners and educators transfer what they have learned in the classroom to the social contexts. Discourse competence examines the learners’ and teachers’ ability to arrange and produce coherent and cohesive texts (Kim, 2020). In the second category, Byram talks about the knowledge derived from linguistic competencies, analytical skills derived from sociolinguistic competency, and attitudes, curiosity, and openness derived from discourse competency (Gong et al., 2021). This conceptual framework helps in understanding and discussing the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity in teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

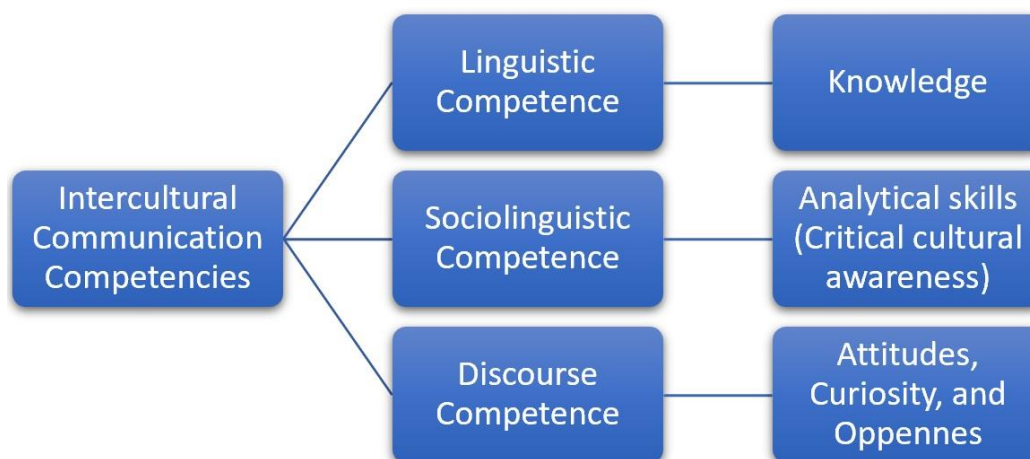


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework.

Methodology

This study was conducted in one of the schools in Thailand where Mandarin (Chinese language) is taught to students as a second or foreign language. The school includes both local and international students from various countries around the world. The participants included 10 teachers with sufficient experience in teaching Mandarin for at least 5 years. The participants were aged between 30 and 55 years. Among the 10 participants, 5 were lecturers, 3 were associate professors, and 2 were professors. The inclusion criteria included at least 2-year experience in teaching Mandarin and 12 months of cultural awareness achieved through regular visits to China. The participants were contacted before the study began to obtain their informed consent.

Since the researchers were allowed to visit the classrooms to observe culturally competent teaching, three types of data emerged in this study. Data was collected using classroom observation, interviews (using a survey questionnaire), and academic journals. The researchers collected more than 5 hours of data focusing on the methods used by the teachers to integrate cultural competence in teaching the Chinese language. The classroom observation also included the student response to the culturally competent pedagogy. The classroom observation was selected because it provides first-hand evidence and immerses the researchers in the environment where data is collected. The immersive experience is more effective and convincing than the information obtained from books and journals.

The survey questionnaires focused on the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Each questionnaire contained five open-ended questions exploring the benefits of integrating cultural awareness and sensitivity in language education. The selected instrument (questionnaire) was used because of its accuracy and reliability in collecting data from a selected population. The researchers also obtained data from the academic journals obtained from databases such as ERIC, ScienceDirect, ResearchGate, Frontiers, and Journal of Language Teaching and Research. A total of 50 articles were obtained from the various databases. However, only 20 were selected and the content was analyzed using a method known as thematic analysis. The selection criteria included relevance to the topic, published over the last five years, peer-reviewed data, and published in a competent journal.

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The procedures used in the study included analyzing the transcripts using open coding, separating the developed codes into various categories using Byram's conceptual framework, and using the codes to develop main themes. The qualitative analysis involved both deductive and inductive thematic analysis. The inductive thematic analysis is where the researcher allows data to determine the themes. This approach was used in developing various codes from the transcripts. The deductive thematic analysis is where the researcher approaches the analysis using preconceived themes and searches for them in the data. Deductive thematic analysis is based on the previous knowledge that the researcher wants to confirm or reject based on the new data. The deductive thematic analysis helps in developing logical conclusions more accurately than the inductive approach.



Results

The qualitative analysis of data shows that language educators in Thailand have positive attitudes toward the Chinese language and culture. Educators believe that teaching Mandarin to students empowers them to become culturally competent communicators. The study also found that culturally sensitive pedagogy cannot be achieved without cultural awareness. This, according to the educators, can be addressed by spending time in the target culture for at least six months. Regular interactions with the target culture can also assist educators in enhancing their cultural competence and performance. The study found various linguistic competencies that educators can develop through cultural awareness. Examples include convention, connotation, comprehension, and conditioning. The study also found various intercultural activities that educators can integrate into the learning process to enhance cultural awareness among learners. Examples include double translation, comparison, and situational settings. These strategies enable educators to engage learners and help them learn how to communicate effectively in the Chinese language.

Table 1

Themes	Description	Examples
Translation and communication	Translating Chinese texts (Mandarin) into a language that learners can understand. Cultural awareness enables accurate translation and communication.	Translating Chinese words such as “treat” (对待) into the right English or Thai words, following the original context (Peng et al., 2020; Gong et al., 2020).
Critical cultural awareness	Refers to an educator's ability to analyze and interpret language through a critical lens.	Challenging stereotypes enables students to understand how the use of language in some contexts can be offensive (Yang, 2019; Feng & Papi, 2020). Educators may also invite learners to give more examples of stereotypes in the Chinese language (Peng et al., 2020).
Convention	Refers to how people behave in common situations. Context and function-determined conventions enable educators to understand conventional utterances used by the Chinese people to perform tasks.	The Chinese word “gung ho” (工合) can be used in the context of labor to mean “working together” (Gong et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2019).
Conditioning	Refers to culturally induced responses to certain words or behaviors.	Greeting elders using certain words generates a conventional response, including blessings and happiness (Feng & Papi, 2020; Wen et al., 2018).
Connotation	Examines culturally significant meanings associated with words.	If used in a certain context, the word “time” can make someone nervous or anxious. This occurs when the word “time” is associated with deadlines, schedules, and pressure (Huang et al., 2019; Yang, 2019).
Comprehension	Refers to a deeper understanding of cultural contexts and how one can use a single word to convey different meanings. Comprehension enables critical analysis and even challenges certain stereotypes.	Cultural awareness enables educators to analyze and criticize the information to create better knowledge (Lai & Tai, 2021). The word “hot” can refer to spicy food or heated temperatures. Contextual interpretation gets better with comprehension.



Discussion

Cultural awareness and sensitivity are important in teaching Chinese as a foreign language because they unlock an educator's potential to translate and communicate effectively. Teaching Mandarin as a foreign language involves various translations that educators must make almost daily to enable learners to understand certain words and how they are used in specific contexts (Peng et al., 2020). While there are several translators that one can use online, most of them lack cultural competence and often translate based on conventional meaning (Gong et al., 2020). Cultural awareness enables educators to translate words based on their contextual meaning (Wu & Miller, 2021). For instance, if someone says "This food is hot" in Mandarin, the correct translation should refer to a spicy food rather than the food's temperature. The contextual understanding of words enables teachers to make accurate translations and helps learners to understand the correct meaning of words.

According to Lai & Tai (2021), teachers perform more than just imparting knowledge found in textbooks. Apart from being educators, teachers are also agents of change and can use their platform to influence positive behaviors among learners. The inseparable bond between language and culture helps learners to understand how certain words can be used to cause pain, confusion, and disagreements (Huang et al., 2019). Cultural awareness enables teachers to understand the embedded meanings that may be hidden at a casual glance (Yang, 2019). Moreover, cultural awareness enables teachers to become confident in their ability to influence positive behaviors among students (Peng et al., 2020). By identifying and challenging stereotypes, teachers enable learners to question certain words for positive and meaningful communication. It is even better for students to gain an understanding of potential stereotypes that can be offensive if used in certain contexts.

Cultural awareness enables teachers to build strong linguistic competencies. Educators should demonstrate strong linguistic abilities to win the confidence of their learners (Shadiev & Yang, 2020). Students are less likely to listen to those who have a limited understanding of the target language and culture. Gong et al. (2020) argue that teachers are more likely to win the confidence of their learners through accurate translations, analysis, and contextualization. One of the factors that demonstrate cultural competency in language education is convention. Li (2020) proposed a cultural awareness framework that enables teachers to understand the benefits they would gain by spending significant time learning and practicing the target foreign culture (Yu & Van Maele, 2018). The framework talks about convention, connotation, comprehension, and condition (Li & Pitkänen, 2018). When asked about their understanding of convention, the teachers argued that cultural awareness helps them to understand how Chinese people use words to generate collective actions such as working together. Teachers also argued that convention helps in understanding how people behave in common situations.

Conditioning, according to Peng et al. (2020), refers to culturally induced behaviors that certain words generate. This is crucial to language teachers because they have to let students understand how people are likely to react to their speech, either spoken or written. In English, for instance, there are metaphors, satires, idioms, and similes that one can use to spice up his or her speech (Gong et al., 2020). Satires are designed to make someone look ridiculous while invoking laughter or embarrassment to humiliate or discredit targets (Peng et al., 2020). One must understand how Chinese people are conditioned to react to certain words or phrases when used in particular contexts. Cultural awareness enables teachers to explain to learners how the Chinese audience may react to idioms, satirical texts, or comical books (Yang, 2019; Makhmudov, 2020). Some of the reactions are inherent in the Chinese culture and have been passed across generations. Even the use of color is a form of communication that invokes a particular reaction from the public.

Connotation is another element of linguistic competency that language educators derive from cultural awareness. According to Lai & Tai (2021), connotation refers to culturally significant meanings associated with words. If used in certain contexts, even common words that people use almost daily can evoke different feelings and images. Liu (2022) argues that cultural awareness enables teachers to understand how words can be placed in different contexts to convey the desired meaning. For instance, telling employees of a company about "time" can generate various feelings and images based on their



understanding of the word. Examples of the meanings that may emerge from the word “treat” (Huang et al., 2019; Gong et al., 2020; Makhmudov, 2020) include hospitality, medications, kindness, and warm welcome. Greetings also tend to convey different meanings depending on how certain words are used. For instance, Chinese greetings such as “Have you eaten?” do not refer to eating but one’s general health and status (Feng & Papi, 2020; Yu & Van Maele, 2018; Gong et al., 2020). It is a way of knowing how one is doing after a long day of working on the farm or business. Connotation helps in understanding the context in which a word is placed and the meaning it conveys.

Another significant element of cultural competence is comprehension. According to Hu & Dai (2021), comprehension refers to a deeper knowledge of a language and the ability to perform critical analysis. Spending more than a year with the Chinese people and learning the language can give language educators sufficient cultural knowledge to understand various Chinese words and how they can use their knowledge to perform critical analysis (Huang et al., 2019). Comprehension is based on the need for students to understand how they can use a language to analyze issues affecting society and suggest solutions (Gong et al., 2020). Comprehension refers to both knowledge and the ability to convert the acquired knowledge into a tool for social change. Cultural awareness prepares both teachers and learners to become agents of social transformation (Chong & Reinders, 2020; Li, 2020). This includes challenging existing stereotypes, discriminations, and wrongful beliefs that undermine societal growth. After completing their education, students will demonstrate their knowledge by writing reports, argumentative essays, and persuasive letters (Makhmudov, 2020). It may be difficult for the learners to achieve the desired levels of language competency without their teacher’s cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Conclusion

This study examined the importance of cultural awareness in teaching the Chinese language. The originality was achieved through the use of observation and interviews. The observation was conducted in classrooms where teachers use their knowledge, skills, and cultural competence to teach the Chinese language. Observations made in the classrooms constitute original data and can be used to challenge or support hypotheses. Teachers also had an opportunity to speak to the researchers through interviews. Through open-ended questionnaires, the teachers expressed their understanding and experience regarding the importance of cultural awareness in teaching the Chinese language. Data obtained from the interviews also constitute original data and can be used in building new knowledge or theories. However, the paper also extracted data from previous studies to expand the evidence.

Recommendation

Language teachers should spend at least six months in China to learn various aspects of the culture associated with the language. Language educators should spend at least 12 months in China for sufficient cultural awareness. Whenever they visit China, language educators should attend social festivals, marriage ceremonies, religious celebrations, and other cultural events to help them learn how language is used in a particular context. This study also found that teachers should have regular visits to China to have a regular understanding of how the language evolves to incorporate intercultural trends. The study has shown how cultural awareness improves linguistic and social competencies.

The various activities that teachers can use in the classroom to integrate cultural awareness include double translation, comparison, and situational settings. The double translation is where students take turns translating Chinese texts. The double translation involves finding another meaning or use of a particular word to enhance knowledge. For instance, the word “treat” can have several meanings, including kindness, medication, and warm welcome. Double translation helps in expanding student knowledge and improving their communication skills. Teachers may rely on groups to create small contests where groups compete to generate the highest number of Chinese vocabulary from a single word. Other strategies that teachers can use include comparisons and situational setting. Comparisons included comparing similarities and differences between students’ own culture and other cultures. The differences will help students learn how words can be used in different contexts to convey the desired meaning.



It is also advisable for Chinese language educators to share their challenges with their colleagues. The teachers who participated in this study said that they usually hold regular discussion sessions where they share challenges they experience in the classrooms and develop appropriate response mechanisms. Teachers should not be afraid to involve their colleagues in areas where they encounter ambiguities or discomfort. Language education is a social exercise and should involve the participation of various stakeholders, including parents.

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