

# The importance of fitting society and culture into Australian university language courses

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Nearly all teachers and sociolinguists would argue that teaching language and teaching society and culture should go hand in hand.

Successful students of foreign languages are expected to be culturally fluent as well as linguistically fluent; meaning that as they learn the language, they should learn the cultural context in which it is used. Without doing so, it is commonly argued, students will not develop the 'communicative competence' which characterises effective language speakers and which can be distinguished from grammatical competence or vocabulary knowledge. Beyond this, knowledge of society and culture also develops 'intercultural competence'; meaning the capacity to interact effectively with people from other cultures.

But actually implementing the 'language-and-culture' teaching model is extremely challenging. The challenges are both theoretical and practical.

What are suitable definitions of 'society' and 'culture'? How can teachers trained as language experts successfully incorporate culture into their teaching? How can teachers account for the different cultural backgrounds of their students, as well as the contentious aspects of culture which are inevitable in complex globalised societies? Can students be motivated to be interested in culture when they enter courses aiming only for linguistic fluency?

The risk for teachers and students is that ‘language’ and ‘culture’ are interpreted as ‘fixed systems’: they are taught as if they are set and distinct canons of knowledge, like the information in textbooks, which often marginalise their dynamic and contentious aspects. Furthermore, when language and culture are separated in this way, it becomes more likely that teachers will concentrate less on culture and more on language. While this may seem more convenient in the short term, it produces students who are less likely to be successful and motivated language users in the long term. In China, for example, students learn English largely from textbooks as part of a credentialist education system; but this creates students who are good ‘test-takers’ but with relatively weak interpersonal communication skills.

In this article I focus on how these problems can be addressed in practice in the Australian university context: in particular, how language majors can be designed to incorporate learning about society and culture. I draw from my experience in the Chinese major at Monash University, a major involving hundreds of students from a wide range of social, cultural, and language backgrounds.

## **Organising courses**

Before considering how majors are structured, it is worth noting some characteristics of Australian universities and their language students. Australian university students who graduate with a major in a particular language will likely have had fewer teaching hours than students at comparable overseas universities. There are fewer contact hours per subject, fewer weeks per semester, and in many cases their undergraduate degree is one year shorter. It is likely that Australian students will not live on campus, and many will study double degrees rather than focusing on a single major. Diplomas of language are common. (It is instructive to compare the structure of language majors, and the available subjects, at three comparably large public universities: the University of Queensland in Australia, the University of California Davis in the United States, and the University of Heidelberg in Germany. The Australian courses provide fewer contact hours and far fewer

options for cultural learning.)

These structural features have several consequences. First, because their time is relatively limited, language students in Australia are likely to concentrate more on developing language skills, which are more quantifiable than cultural skills. For instance, some universities suggest that graduates of their Chinese language majors will achieve at least Level 3 in an international standardised test of Chinese language proficiency for non-native speakers (the HSK); but there is no comparable standard for cultural knowledge. Second, limited time means that fewer cultural options tend to be available; it is uncommon for Australian universities to offer 'area studies' subjects specialising in art, for example. Third, students' emotional and practical commitment to their majors is likely to be lower in Australia. Less time on campus, more external commitments, the lack of a coherent cohort of fellow students, and the distraction of other courses can all jeopardise motivation and the 'sense of belonging' which is important to sustain high retention levels.

In this context, it is concerning that some universities, particularly those with relatively limited human and financial resources, have nominally integrated language and culture into single units (the Chinese major at Macquarie University is one example). On one level, this approach is consistent with the 'language-as-culture' model, demonstrating the fundamental integration of culture into language. But in implementing this integrated model, problems arise when teachers and students have relatively little time to cover the cultural aspects of the course, or when teachers lack the knowledge and resources to teach culture and society effectively. Cultural teaching can be sacrificed for language teaching, but the reverse rarely happens. In the very common situation where some language students have cultural connections to the target language, but others do not, this particularly marginalises the opportunity to 'level the playing field' by systematically considering fundamental aspects of cultural knowledge which some students will have internalised, but which others may not understand.

Integrating culture into language units is useful, but it is only the beginning. Most

language majors at Australian universities go beyond this by mandating separate subjects which cover cultural and social topics specifically. Sometimes, as in the Chinese major at Monash University or the Arabic major at the University of Melbourne (two of the largest and most prestigious universities in Australia), a ‘cornerstone’ and ‘capstone’ model is adopted, where, to complete the major, students must specifically engage with cultural topics at the midpoint and end of their major. This allows universities to mandate that students have some level of cultural knowledge and assess their cultural competence explicitly. The model works even more effectively if there is scope for students to select further electives in relevant cultural areas as part of their major, but this largely depends on the size of the university and the capacity of other administrative units.

## What needs to be taught?

The Chinese and Arabic languages are good examples of the quandaries that teachers of society and culture face. Their historical, cultural, and literary traditions are so vast that teachers must somehow choose aspects they feel are most relevant. In both cases, political power influences what is perceived as mainstream culture. With its large size, economic power, and authoritarian methods, the government of the People’s Republic of China attempts to exercise cultural hegemony through education. The PRC produces and distributes a large amount of cultural material, through Confucius Institutes for example, but this material is designed specifically to reinforce state power and marginalises the views of minorities, political critics, or Chinese people outside mainland China. Teachers of Arabic culture face some similar problems—the cultural domination of economic powers like Saudi Arabia, for example—but the level of diversity in language, culture, and politics in the Arabic-speaking world, including the diaspora, makes choosing appropriate material more difficult. If teachers of culture do not examine their sources of cultural material consciously and critically, it is likely they will end up reinforcing the cultural norms of political and economic powers. The case of a controversial Chinese culture and society textbook used at secondary school level in Victoria, which uncritically

reiterated the PRC's claim to the South China Sea, is a good example.

The principles of decolonisation in education fit differently into different languages: China, Japan, France, and the Arab world each have radically different colonial histories. Regardless, principles of decolonised teaching are valuable for all teachers of culture. If teachers reflect on 'the extent to which our teaching reproduces structures of racialised disadvantage or exclusion' (as the Decolonising SOAS project of the School of Oriental and African Studies puts it) then they are more likely to incorporate marginalised voices into their teaching and to regard powerful voices more critically. That said, it is difficult to criticise a mainstream cultural canon without knowing what that canon is; in fact, taking a decolonial approach makes it even more important to understand why cultural hegemons exist and how they exercise control.

The (recently redesigned) cultural units in the Chinese major at Monash University attempt to address this quandary. At 'cornerstone' level (the second year of the major) students can choose between a unit about the Mao period of Chinese history and one about contemporary China, or take both. The 'capstone' (final year) units concern Chinese politics and unity and diversity in China. These are cultural units which sometimes use the Chinese language, but are not taught in Chinese. They cover key topics in Chinese studies, such as values and beliefs, social organisation, and human diversity. The units were developed by a team of academics who have attempted to avoid overlaps between the different units while ensuring that the most significant topics are covered.

Developing these units was a complicated and sometimes contentious process. It is easy to point to things which are *not* covered, such as classical Chinese language and culture, Chinese linguistics, or Chinese art and music. Nevertheless, within the resources available, this structure represents an attempt to put contemporary Chinese society and culture in its historical context, and to explain China's political culture in a way which fundamentally allows for critique. On completing these units, students should have a basic understanding of China's social and political structure

and the cultural principles which underpin it. They should also be able to know what they don't know, meaning that they are able to use research to explore topics of interest to themselves. If these units are successful, students will be more motivated to continue learning the Chinese language (or learning to translate it), and their cultural knowledge will reinforce their language knowledge.

Taken individually, these units do not demonstrate full integration of language and cultural learning. However, as part of a major or language diploma, they are studied alongside language units taken at suitable levels for individual students. These units provide an opportunity for students of different language levels and from different backgrounds to collaborate and share knowledge.

## Principles for teaching

In Australia the burden of area studies teaching, particularly outside of the West, falls very heavily on administrative units concerned with language. For example, the Chinese Studies discipline at Monash, which falls under a school for language and literature, offers nearly all of Monash's units concerned specifically with China; other disciplines such as history, politics, sociology and law (in other schools) make relatively little contribution. While larger administrative units can normally recruit teachers with expertise outside language, there can be resourcing difficulties when teachers who are mainly experienced in teaching languages are forced to teach cultural topics. This is a factor which can lead to the marginalisation of cultural topics described above.

To expand on the previous section, it can be useful to think of the modern Australian language classroom as post-colonial. The legacies of the British tradition underpin many aspects of universities, but the students reflect a 'super-diverse' world. One particular challenge is the gradual integration of 'heritage languages' and heritage learners into the mainstream university curriculum. They are particularly common in Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. These heritage learners, students with

ethnic or cultural links to the target language, form part of a system of language teaching which was not initially designed for them. They overlap, particularly in Chinese language teaching, with international students who have come to Australia specifically for university study.

Setting aside questions of language teaching, what is the effect of this diversity in the cultural classroom? In some Chinese studies units at Monash University taught during the COVID-19 pandemic, students who had never been to China learnt alongside students who had never left China. Some students were familiar with every topic that was taught; others had learnt Chinese, mostly online, for only one year.

The challenge for teachers is to maximise the benefits of this situation. The idea of emic and etic perspectives—referring to insider and outsider, integrated with objective and subjective, points of view—is so useful a concept in this type of classroom that I suggest that it is taught to students explicitly as part of an introduction to cultural studies. Distinguishing between emic and etic allows students to reflect on their own position and history. It encourages analysis of the subjectivity of authors and producers of cultural discourse. Learning about the strengths and weaknesses of emic and etic perspectives provides students and teachers with a useful analytical framework to critique ideas about culture.

A second useful principle is flexibility with the target language. At Monash University the Chinese studies units mentioned above have normally been taught and assessed in English. This is hardly a decolonial approach; it also means that the cultural units do not directly contribute to students' language progress, which is inconsistent with the language-as-culture model. Nonetheless, it is the best approach in the circumstances because of the diversity of the student body. The widely differing backgrounds of students, the many entry points to the Chinese major, and the incorporation of students of Chinese translation all mean that students in the compulsory cultural units have radically different levels of Chinese skills. Using English means that students who are less familiar with Chinese culture can



communicate in a way that is comfortable to them, whereas native Chinese speakers can develop a new skill, explaining and discussing Chinese culture in a foreign language. When students from different backgrounds work together in and out of class, this actively facilitates intercultural competence. Analysing a Chinese television drama about the family in groups which include Chinese international students and Chinese language learners (as is done in one of Monash's cultural units) brings emic and etic perspectives together. The process of discussion allows students to compare and contrast their ideas about the structure and relationships of families, which develops the students' knowledge but also allows them to develop intercultural communication skills.

Delia Lin argues for the benefits of 'double writing'—an approach to teaching which facilitates 'reflexive inquiry' through collaboration between learners from different backgrounds. But these principles are specific to the Chinese classroom. In a French classroom, where heritage learners are fewer, where there are fewer entry points to the major, and where it is possible to develop greater relative fluency during the major, consistent use of the target language may be the best approach.

## Conclusion

A recent study of the Australian Curriculum makes the point that, although cultural diversity is part of 'the lived experience of virtually all Australians', there are many factors undermining the development of intercultural understanding. My comments above demonstrate that, even in university language majors, many factors limit the development of students' intercultural capacities.

My comments about how to facilitate effective cultural teaching in these majors only begin to address the challenges teachers face. But while it is difficult to suggest what teachers should do, it is particularly necessary to warn against the two most important limitations I mention above: the structural marginalisation of culture studies in language majors and the risks of ignoring diverse voices.



*Image: University students in Melbourne. Copyright: University of Melbourne.*