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Use of Social Media to Foster an Active Construction of Understanding through Cultural Reflection in a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Social media have been increasingly embraced by educators as an appealing platform to engage Generation Y learners academically, socially and culturally. This article reports preliminary findings of an ongoing research study that examines the use of social media (in particular, blogs and YouTube) in fostering learners' cultural reflection and active construction of understanding in a foreign language. Data consist of blog entries and digital stories made by learners of Vietnamese as a foreign language. An analysis is made of the learners' target cultural experiences using Moran's (2001) cultural experiential approach. Findings are discussed with implications for using social media to integrate cultural learning in foreign language education, and suggestions for further research.

1 Introduction

Culture has been a topic of research in many different disciplines for decades. In the field of second language acquisition, culture has received a great deal of attention. A simple search with the keywords "language and culture" on Google, for instance, would give over 2.5 million results in just 0.03 seconds. Numerous scholarly articles have been written on culture, language, and the interrelationship between language and culture. It is commonly agreed that target culture should be integrated into language curriculum. However, as culture is a complex topic, but we have not yet found consensus answers to questions such as "what culture to teach?," "what is the best approach to teach culture?", and "what are the goals of culture teaching?". These questions are very important, especially to language educators. As Levet and Waryn (2006, p. 95) put it: "If we want to teach language and culture and access layers of culture which are particularly difficult to access, we need the right tools."

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has gradually become an established field since its appearance half a century ago. Recent developments in CALL have been reported in numerous scholarly journals dedicated to this field such as "Computer Assisted Language Learning," "ReCALL," "CALICO Journal" and "Language Learning & Technology." Researchers and practitioners of CALL have shared their expertise and experiences using CALL to improve the quality of second language education. Among the most recent developments in communication and information technology, social media have gradually been embraced by many educators to engage their students, and to bring authentic and enriching educational experiences to their classrooms.

In today's increasingly globalised world, as more and more people from different cultures come to interact with each other, intercultural communicative competence is considered an important objective of education in general, and second language education, in particular.

The present article is a reflective practice paper about using social media to help students of Vietnamese as a foreign language actively construct their understanding of the target culture. Although there is an increasing number of publications on Vietnamese as a native and a target language (Do, 2013; Ho, 2009, 2011, 2013; Nguyen, 2013; Nguyen & Basturkmen, 2013; Nguyen & Macken, 2008; Nguyen & Ho, 2013, 2014; Tran, 2013), research into Vietnamese and CALL is still in its infancy stages. Therefore, this article is an endeavour to bridge this gap in the literature.

In the following part, some theoretical background will be briefly reviewed, followed by a description of the context of the current practice. Some implications for foreign language education and suggestions for further research will also be included.

2   Theoretical background

2.1   Teaching culture in language education

2.1.1   Culture – What is it? And why does it need to be taught?

As culture is multifaceted and complex, it has been defined differently in different disciplines. For example, there are over 300 definitions of culture from various fields such as education, psychology, anthropology, and cultural studies (Baldwin, Faulkner, Hecht, & Lindsley, 2006). Just a simple search on Google with the keywords "definition of culture" gives over two million results. In the field of language education, different viewpoints on culture, culture learning, and culture teaching, have been provided by numerous practitioners and theorists from various disciplines (Moran, 2001). In other words, there is no consensus on the content of culture, nor ways to teach culture. As proposed by Atkinson (1999), the nature of culture is a matter of dispute.

Culture has been viewed as civilisation (commonly referred to as "big C" culture), and as customs and social practices (commonly referred to as "small c" culture) (Moran, 2001). In addition to these two distinctive views, culture can also be analysed according to five aspects: culture as elemental, culture as relative, culture as group membership, culture as contested, and culture as individual (Levy, 2007). In Levy's thorough description and analysis of culture, two major points are particularly relevant to this article and are worth mentioning here: (1) learning about our own culture is the first essential step to better understand our frame of reference; and (2) as cultural knowledge varies from one person to another, we have to encourage the sharing of individual experiences and build upon them.

As can be seen in the following parts of this article, in our curriculum, emphasis is placed on our students' learning about their own cultures, and sharing of experiences is encouraged. This practice, strengthened through the use of social media, has been found to facilitate the students' active understanding of the Vietnamese culture.

To answer the first question of "What is culture?", we have chosen to adopt a working definition of culture as "membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings" (Kramsch, 1998, p. 10).

As to the second question of "Why does culture need to be taught?", according to Lange and Paige (2003, p. xi), culture should be at the core of language acquisition because it is "the context and content of communication in any form, the link to any discipline, the opportunity to contrast and compare cultures and cultural contexts, and the most authentic way to connect the individual language learner to the broader target language community."

From the points discussed above, it can be concluded that culture is a complex topic, but given its importance, it should be included in the language curriculum.

2.1.2   Goals of cultural teaching

In the evaluation of cultural learning, native-speaker performances have traditionally been used as a benchmark to assess learners. For example, in his proposed "framework for comprehensive foreign language learning objectives" (van Ek, 1986, p. 33), six competences were listed as follows: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, socio-cultural competence, and social competence. Among the six competences, the first two explicitly refer to the native-speaker norms, against which the learner is assessed.

However, the model of the native speaker has been debated (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993). For examples, in terms of cultural learning, it is unreasonable to expect learners to behave like native speakers of the target culture. As Kramsch (2003) argues: "Our purpose in teaching culture through language is not to make our students into little French or little Germans, but in making them understand why the speakers of two different languages act and react the way they do, whether in fictional texts or in social encounters, and what the consequences of these insights may mean for the learner." (p. 32) In other words, in cultural teaching, teachers should encourage students to make informed choices as to how to be culturally appropriate by facilitating their understanding of the target culture.

One of the skills foreign language teachers need to address in facilitating students' understanding of the target culture should be *intercultural communicative competence* (Byram, 1997).

Byram (1997) proposed five components of intercultural competence that include *intercultural attitudes*, *knowledge*, *skills of interpreting and relating*, *skills of discovery and interaction*, and *critical cultural awareness*. According to Byram (2012), the difference between intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence is that in the former, culture is noticed but language is not, while in the latter, language is noticed. Within this framework of intercultural communicative competence, the native speaker norm is no longer used to assess the learners.

At the Centre for Language Studies of the National University of Singapore (NUS), where I work, four objectives have been set for its existing foreign language programmes, namely communicative competence, cultural awareness, independent learning, and social competence (Teaching Development Committee, 2006); therefore, the Vietnamese Language Programme set *intercultural communicative competence* as one of the goals to pursue in its Vietnamese language curriculum.

2.1.3   Approaches to cultural teaching

Since there exist different views of culture, various approaches to cultural teaching have been proposed. Kramsch (1993) discusses the traditional approach to teaching culture as transmission of information about the target country, its people as well as their attitudes and beliefs. This approach to teaching culture has been challenged, because it ignores the fact that culture is a social construct and that language is a social practice. Other emerging approaches included in Kramsch's discussion are: *Establishing a 'sphere of interculturality*,*' Teaching culture as an interpersonal process*, *Teaching culture as difference*, and *Crossing disciplinary boundaries*.

It is important to note that within these four emerging lines of thought, students are encouraged to reflect on their native culture, synthesise information about other cultures as well as other related disciplines, and actively construct their own understanding of the target culture.

Of all the different approaches to teaching culture, we decided to adopt Moran's (2001) cultural experience approach for its comprehensiveness, adaptability, and relevance to our Vietnamese Language Programme. This approach also reflects the thoughts and practices of the four lines of thought mentioned above, as it facilitates an in-depth understanding of culture through an active educational process.

The cultural experience is defined as "any encounter between learners and another way of life, be it first-hand through direct involvement with people of the other culture or indirectly through learning materials in the language classroom. These encounters elicit four kinds of culture learning, or cultural knowings: knowing about, knowing how, knowing why, and knowing oneself" (Moran,

2001, p. 8). Moran's framework for cultural knowings has four components, which are presented below:

> *Knowing about:* This interaction includes all activities that consist of gathering and demonstrating acquisition of **cultural information** – facts, data, or knowledge about products, practices, and perspectives of the culture. This is information about the specific culture and language, as well as about the nature of culture and the processes of learning and entering other cultures in general, or information about students' own culture(s).
>
> *Knowing how:* This interaction involves acquiring **cultural practices –** behaviors, actions, skills, saying, touching, looking, standing, or other forms of "doing." This calls for direct or simulated participation in the everyday life of the people of the target culture, according to their customs and traditions, using their tools or technology – and their language – to establish bona fide relationships with them.
>
> *Knowing why:* This interaction deals with developing an understanding of fundamental **cultural perspectives** – the perception, beliefs, values, and attitudes that underlie or permeate all aspects of the culture. This is a process of learners' structured inquiry into observations, information, and experiences with the culture. Knowing why requires skills in probing, analyzing, and explaining the cultural phenomena learners encounter, which necessarily involves a comparison with their own culture and themselves. Learners need to understand insider and outsider perspectives: the emic and the etic. Learners need to understand the culture on its own terms by using their own powers of cultural analysis and comparison. The basic values of a culture are an important point of comparison with the values of the culture of the learners.
>
> *Knowing oneself*: This interaction concerns the individual learners – their values, opinions, feelings, questions, reactions, thoughts, ideas, and their own cultural values as a central part of the cultural experience. It deals with **self-awareness**. (Moran, 2001, pp. 15–17)

Moran's cultural experience approach underpinned the design of our language activities and culture-based projects, and, therefore, this framework was used for data analysis in this article.

2.2   Social media and language education

Spurred by the rapid development of technology from the early 1980s, CALL has now become an important component of second and foreign language learning pedagogy (Fotos & Browne, 2004). Much of the theory underlying the present stage of CALL, namely integrative CALL, is derived from the Vygotskyan sociocultural model of language learning (Wertsch, 1985) in which interaction is regarded as essential for the creation of meaning. (Fotos & Browne, 2004, p. 6).

Among the most recent development of technology, the Internet, commonly referred to as Web 2.0 technology, has been embraced by educators. Social media, being the most recent application of Web 2.0, has caught the attention of language teachers and researchers alike (see a review of Web 2.0 in Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). As an appealing form of expression that encourages both interaction and reflection, social media can be a powerful teaching tool that appeals to students today given their affinity for technology, desire to connect with others, flexible attention, and visual orientation (Bernstein, 2011). A growing body of literature, for example, has confirmed the use of blogging in language skills development (Bloch, 2007; Lee, 2010), fostering self-reflection (Yang, 2009), and promoting intercultural learning and learner autonomy (Lee, 2011). In recent years, Web 2.0 sites like YouTube have also been incorporated into language classrooms (Brook, 2011; Terantino, 2011). Studies have shown that YouTube can be used as a supplementary tool for learning and teaching that encourages students' participation and increases motivation (Brook, 2011).

In the current context, our research has also pointed to encouraging evidence of the use of blogging in improving students' reading and writing skills, increasing their motivation and sense of achievement, enhancing their understanding of the target culture, and promoting learner autonomy (Ho, 2009). In addition, blogging was found to be a valuable resource for social interaction, which enhanced students' motivation, skills development and learning experiences in general (Blackstone & Ho, 2011).

To sum up, despite the growing number of studies on culture, technology and learning, there remains an important research gap concerning the particular relationship between cultural learning and teaching and the differential application of new technologies (Levy, 2007, p. 105). In other words, "while its importance is universally recognized, there is no consensus on what the term encompasses, how culture should be integrated into language instruction, or on what role technology can and should play in that process" (Godwin-Jones, 2013, p. 1). Therefore, more research into this topic is needed.

3   The context

3.1   *Vietnamese Language Programme at the National University of Singapore*

Vietnamese has been taught at the National University of Singapore for over fifteen years as an elective subject for Singaporean and international students. Most of the students enrolled in the Vietnamese Language Programme are undergraduate students from the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences, Engineering, Science, or Business. Six modules are offered with three proficiency levels: Elementary (Vietnamese 1 and Vietnamese 2), Intermediate (Vietnamese 3 and Vietnamese 4), and Advanced (Vietnamese 5 and Vietnamese 6). Each module is taught in one semester with a total number of over 50 contact hours.

3.2   *Social media types*

For the past six years, different kinds of social media have been used to engage our students in the target language and culture. Our course blog was first launched in 2008 to give students and teachers an additional platform to share their ideas and thoughts. To further facilitate the sharing of self-produced videos, our students opened a course YouTube channel in 2010. Since then, we have also opened a Twitter account and a Facebook page. All these types of media use were initiated by our students to engage current and prospective students in learning about Vietnamese language and culture. In this article, due to limited time and scope, the focus is only on our students' use of blogs and self-produced videos.

3.3   *Task types*

The data in this article were collected from the students' blog entries and self-produced videos. The blogging project and digital storytelling project were part of continual assessment of Vietnamese as a foreign language that included two written tests, an oral test, homework, projects and class participation. The blogging project was implemented in four modules: post-elementary (Vietnamese 2), pre-intermediate (Vietnamese 3), intermediate (Vietnamese 4) and pre-advanced (Vietnamese 5). Depending on the students' proficiency levels, they were assigned different tasks. The digital storytelling project was conducted in the pre-advanced module (Vietnamese 5).

4   Social media use for the active construction of cultural understanding

In the following part, students' blogging and digital storytelling projects are discussed to illustrate how social media were used in the cultural experience approach.

4.1   *Knowing about: Acquiring cultural information*

In this part of cultural learning, our Vietnamese 2 students learned some cultural information about Vietnamese culture, such as some places of interest in Vietnam, and some well-known Vietnamese dishes. In order to collect this kind of cultural information, the students were requested to do an Internet search or interview native speakers of Vietnamese. After that, the students posted on their blogs a video that they found on YouTube about a place in Vietnam that they found most

interesting (see Fig. 1). They also posted photographs that they collected to describe some famous Vietnamese foods (see Fig. 2). The purpose of these activities was to help the students to acquire new knowledge of the target culture and share this kind of information with their classmates and/or other Internet users (if they chose to make their blog posts public). In our classes, blogs facilitate students' active construction of knowledge and honed their *skills of discovery*.

Fig. 1. Sharing a YouTube video about places of interest in Vietnam

Fig. 2. Sharing photographs of Vietnamese food

4.2   Knowing how

As part of the Vietnamese language education at the NUS, different activities were organised to facilitate students' direct or simulated participation in some cultural practices of Vietnamese people. For example, some organised activities included Vietnamese cooking lessons, Vietnamese singing and dancing activities, and immersion trips to Vietnam. During this part of cultural learning, Vietnamese 3 students posted a blog entry to reflect on their first-hand experiences in learning to cook a Vietnamese dish. Another student made a video of her visit to a handicraft village in the

Mekong Delta during her immersion trip to Vietnam and posted that on the YouTube channel that was created (see Fig. 3). Through these activities, our students' *skills of interpreting and relating* were improved.
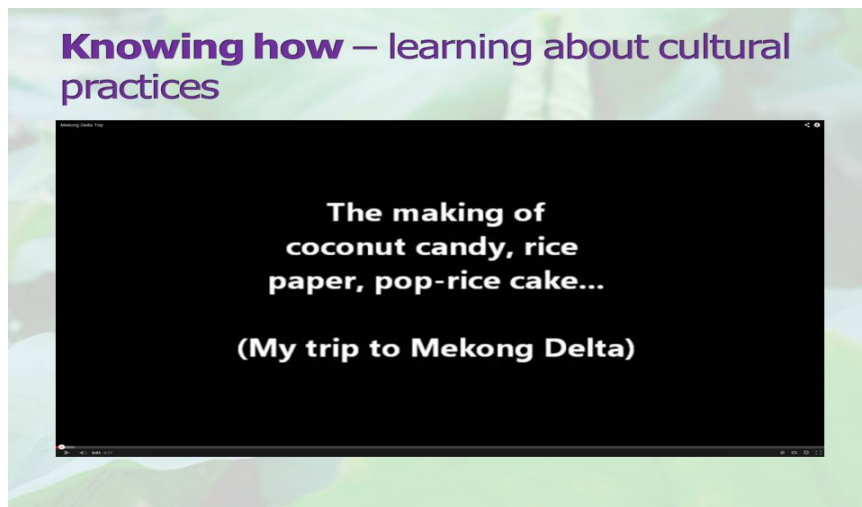

Fig. 3. Making a video of a visit to a local village

4.3 Knowing why

The cultural experiential approach also entails learning about the similarities and differences between the culture of students and the target culture. In the Vietnamese language curriculum, different tasks are designed to help students improve their understanding of Vietnamese beliefs, values, and attitudes, as well as their own, through cultural analysis and comparison. The following are some examples that show students' observation of cultural differences and their explanation. In the first example, one Vietnamese 3 student wrote about the similarities and differences between Malay traditional weddings and Vietnamese ones (see Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Discovering cultural explanations

The second example shows one Vietnamese 2 student's reflection upon seeing a Vietnamese film (see Fig. 5). She wrote about the similarities and differences between her own culture and the Vietnamese culture portrayed in the screened film (see Fig. 6).

Fig. 5. Discovering cultural explanations through film (1)

Fig. 6. Discovering cultural explanations through film (2)

When the students blogged about their cultural explanations, they were also able to discuss similar topics with their classmates on this online platform. Through this process, the students could improve their interpreting and relating skills, as well as their *critical cultural awareness*.

4.4 Knowing oneself

Throughout their Vietnamese language educational experiences, students can learn more about themselves in terms of values, feelings, thoughts and ideas. At the end of one semester, for example, students shared in class and on their blogs their reflections on their journey of learning Vietnamese, the things they learned along the way, and how these experiences made a difference to

their life. The Vietnamese 5 students were also required to make a video to introduce Singapore to prospective Vietnamese visitors in the target language. Their introduction video covers different aspects of Singapore such as food, cultural attractions, beliefs, and ways of life. The following are some print shots of the Vietnamese 5 students' digital stories (see Fig. 7 and Fig. 8).

Fig. 7. Introducing life in Singapore to Vietnamese people (1)

Fig. 8. Introducing life in Singapore to Vietnamese people (2)

Upon reflection on their Vietnamese language learning journeys, some Vietnamese 6 students shared that they had learned not only the Vietnamese language and culture, but also a lot about themselves as well. Knowing oneself, thus, could be seen as the most important result of cultural learning.

5   Implications for foreign language education

From these experiences of integrating social media into the Vietnamese language curriculum, positive evidence has been found to confirm the affordances of Web 2.0 technology for language

teaching that have been reported in the literature (see Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). The integration of Web 2.0 technology into cultural teaching is essential, because the Internet gives students access to rich cultural resources and authentic native language use (Godwin Jones, 2013). In addition, Web 2.0 expands the language classrooms by giving students an extended environment to interact, co-construct meaning and become engaged in the subject matter, which can help improve their motivation and peer-to-peer interaction (Brook, 2011). Web 2.0 technology can also empower students to make their mark on the world, because according to Warschauer (2004, p. 23) "when creating a multimedia document that will be displayed on the Internet […], students are involved in creatively bringing together several media to share with a wide international audience, and perhaps even helping to create the very rules by which multimedia is created, given the current creative explosion of new forms of online expression." Creating knowledge and publishing online for real audiences is indeed a powerful feature of Web 2.0.

In order to make the best use of Web 2.0 technology for effective language teaching and learning, several salient points should be paid attention to. First of all, well-designed tasks, approximating real-world tasks and suitability to students' proficiency levels, are critical for maximising the potential of social media in language education. In addition, technology affordance should also be taken into account. It goes without saying that not all students are technology-savvy, nor do they have equal access to technology. Further, depending on their learning styles, some may prefer face-to-face interaction in a classroom to communicating and learning online. Lastly, the issue of privacy should also be seriously considered when working online. Teachers should raise students' awareness of their digital footprints when students are working online.

6 Conclusion and suggestions for further research

This was a reflective practice article on the incorporation of Web 2.0 technology for cultural learning. Although it is limited in scope and its results are not necessarily generalisable to other contexts, several important implications could be drawn from this study. After reviewing related literature on culture, cultural teaching, and social media in language education, we also discussed the use of blogs and digital stories in the Vietnamese language curriculum in the light of Moran (2001)'s cultural experience approach.

Since intercultural learning is not easy to measure (Godwin-Jones, 2013), further research on the assessment of cultural learning would be beneficial. An empirical study on the effectiveness of technology affordances for cultural learning would be desirable. Another topic that might be of interest is the effect of pragmatic instruction on the development of pragmatic competence in an e-learning environment.

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