

INTEGRATION OF DIGITAL MULTIMODAL COMPOSING ASSESSMENT INTO THE TEACHING REFORM OF INTERCULTURAL COURSES FOR ENGLISH MAJORS

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Abstract: Intercultural courses for English majors in Chinese higher education have predominantly focused on the introduction of basic cultural knowledge from the mainstream English-speaking countries and the relevant linguistic expressions of such cultures. This approach is neither conducive to cultivating students' critical thinking on cultural similarities and differences nor improving their global competence. The globalized development and the new-era mission of enhancing China's international communication capacity have raised higher requirement for English majors to gain intercultural awareness and competence with the combination of "the love for family and country", "global perspective", and "telling China's stories well". This study draws insights from the emerging theory of Digital Multimodal Composing in foreign language education and adopts a formative assessment teaching strategy to organically incorporate the three aforementioned aspects in the reform of the English majors' intercultural course - Comparison of Chinese and Foreign Cultures. Based on the integration of a short video project as the formative assessment into the reform, the study reveals that by facilitating students' analysis of cultural differences between China and other countries via multimodality, we could strengthen their identification with Chinese culture, improve their critical thinking skills regarding cultural similarities and differences, and boost their capacity to effectively tell and disseminate China's stories from the global perspective of Sino-foreign cultural dialogue.

Keywords: Digital multimodal composing; Teaching reform; Intercultural course; English major

1 INTRODUCTION

For a long time, intercultural courses for English majors in Chinese higher education have predominantly focused on the introduction of basic cultural knowledge from the mainstream English-speaking countries and the relevant linguistic expressions of such cultures[1]. This approach is neither conducive to cultivating students' critical thinking on cultural similarities and differences across nations nor improving their global competence—that is, the ability to not only understand but also actively engage in intercultural dialogues and spur cooperation across nations[2]. In the new era of China's development, foreign language education in university bears the new mission of fostering students with both good language skills and international communication capacity so as to enhance the global influence of Chinese civilization. Intercultural awareness and competence that organically combine "the love for family and country" with a "global perspective" are crucial for "telling China's stories well and spreading China's voice effectively". In this vein, teaching reform on intercultural courses for English majors should focus on raising students' sensitivity to Sino-foreign cultural differences, strengthening their identification with Chinese culture through critical analysis, and fostering their ability to narrate Chinese cultures within a global vision of cross-cultural dialogues.

Currently, short video projects are increasingly valued by language teachers in China due to their novelty and potential to significantly motivate students. By assessing such short video projects, scholars on EFL in China have also begun to examine students' multimodal composing skills[3] and digital narrative abilities for telling China's stories[4]. Drawing insights from the emerging theory of Digital Multimodal Composing (DMC) in foreign language education[5], this study integrates the formative assessment task of creating short videos on "telling China's stories from a comparative perspective of Chinese and foreign cultures" into the teaching reform of English majors' intercultural course - Comparison of Chinese and Foreign Cultures. It aims to: 1) deepen students' identification with Chinese culture through the organic synergy of linguistic and visual modes in a comparative perspective, thereby enhancing their national identity and cultural affinity; 2) improve students' critical reflection on Sino-foreign cultural differences; and 3) promote the formation of a global vision for cultural dialogues between China and other countries, and within this vision, enhance their ability to effectively tell China's stories to the international community.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW OF TEACHING REFORM ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COURSES

2.1 Studies on Theoretical and Practical Models

Since the 1990s, Chinese scholars have conducted a substantial body of research on theoretical models and teaching practices of intercultural competence and communication from the perspective of foreign language education. Sun brought out the theoretical framework of "CREED" to guide the reform of intercultural courses. He pointed out that the five basic principles, that is, "Critiquing", "Reflecting", "Exploring", "Empathizing", and "Doing", should be the cores

of the reform and be organically integrated into the curriculum[6]. In the past decade, more and more scholars have attached great importance to studies on the practical models so as to transform the theoretical ones of intercultural communicative competence into teaching practices[7-8]. One of the well-known practical models is called “A Reference Framework for China’s Intercultural Competence Teaching in Foreign Language Education”, which was proposed by Zhang Hongling and her research team. This framework is constituted by the structure of three dimensions and nine elements - Cognitive Understanding (knowledge of foreign, Chinese, and universal cultures), Affective Attitudes (cultural awareness, national identity, and global vision), and Behavioral Skills (intercultural realization, dialogue, and exploration) and emphasizes the organic synergy of students’ “love of family and country”, “global perspective”, and “intercultural competence”[9].

2.2 Studies on Teaching Design and Strategies

By contrast, studies on the teaching design and strategies in the class is comparatively insufficient. Fu and Zhang introduced the main methods of intercultural training, such as cultural assimilation, intercultural communication workshops and culture-general simulations, and applied them to foreign language classrooms[10]. Huang proposed a process-oriented cultural teaching strategy and accessed students’ reflective journals based on comparative readings of Chinese and foreign cultures[11]. In the past few years, more Chinese scholars have begun to explore how to use different teaching methods, e.g., Outcome Based Education (OBE), to implement “Curriculum Ideology and Politics” in intercultural teaching reform so as to cultivate students’ critical intercultural awareness and enhance their cultural confidence[12]. By far, scholars mainly reply on three methods to evaluate students’ intercultural awareness and competence: questionnaires, self-designed assessment scales, and student interviews[13].

While the extensive research on practical models and teaching strategies of reforming intercultural courses provides great insights for this study, it further adopts the theoretical framework of Digital Multimodal Composing and integrates the formative assessment of short video project in order to bring in the new analytical lens and strategy for teaching intercultural courses.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF DIGITAL MULTIMODAL COMPOSING (DMC)

3.1 Definition of DMC

In the age of smart media and digital intelligence, diverse media and semiotic resources play increasingly significant roles in both foreign language teaching and learning. Digital Multimodal Composing (DMC) refers to activities that require learners to use digital tools to construct texts through multiple semiotic modes such as words, images, and sounds[5]. More and more researchers on language education are now investigating in what ways language learners could be affected by DMC and how it could be employed in the second language (L2) teaching classrooms [5, 14-15]. Currently, scholarly research on the assessment of digital multimodal composing and its integration into teaching reform is still in the exploratory phase[3]. Liu and Zhang argued that DMC involved an integrated use of multiple competencies, requiring comprehensive assessment of students’ linguistic proficiency, critical thinking, and intercultural competence[16]. Hung et al. proposed evaluating multimodal compositions through five modes—linguistic, visual, dynamic, auditory, and spatial [17]. Hafner and Ho further emphasized assessing how students organized and coordinated multiple modes coherently and effectively to express concepts and contents, and highlighted the importance of combining self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher assessment during the teaching process[18].

3.2 Video in DMC

Videos play a significant part in DMC, especially for L2 writing classes. Videos enable learners to feel, to be entertained, and to express themselves during their interplay with various semiotic modes. Studies have embarked on how video projects could help students learn foreign languages. Toohey et al. examined how video making could contribute to second language learning and engage L2 learners in higher-level literacy consideration and critical reflection about their agency and expressions[19]. Cimasko & Shin showed that L2 students could become more effective in learning languages by turning their written essays into multimodal digital videos[20]. Salmerón et al. looked into how L2 students’ using Internet videos to help themselves learn about complicated issues in a different language[21]. In summary, video projects are one of the useful DCM strategies to be employed by teachers in the language classrooms[5].

Drawing insights from research on DMC in different language classrooms, this paper primarily focuses on the linguistic and visual modes and adopts both peer and teacher assessment in the teaching process. By integrating the DCM strategy of video project, this study explores how students’ creation of short videos can help improve their identification with Chinese culture, their ability to reflect on Sino-foreign cultural differences, and their capacity to disseminate Chinese culture within a global perspective of cross-cultural dialogue.

4 TEACHING DESIGN

4.1 Introduction of the Course

Comparison of Chinese and Foreign Cultures is an intercultural course for English majors at the author's institution. After completing the first-year courses on Chinese culture, students take this course in the first semester of their second year. Generally, they have a basic grasp of fundamental Chinese cultural concepts and their English expressions. However, they lack the ability to critically compare and analyze cultural differences between China and other countries and to construct the China's stories from the global perspective of intercultural dialogue.

This course uses the text book entitled *Intercultural Communication: A Comparison of Chinese and English Cultures* published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and edited by Zhang Guiping. It consists of eight themes of Chinese and foreign cultures: "Language", "Clothing", "Food", "Alcohol Culture", "Tea and Coffee", "Festivals", "Medicine", and "Transportation". The instructor is primarily responsible for introducing the first two themes and adopts an inquiry-based teaching model during classes, which involves the teacher's raising questions at the beginning of the class, students' reading textbook and viewing of videos and documentaries for deeper understanding, group discussions for possible answers, and finally the instructors' comments. This model demonstrates to students how to conduct critical analysis of Sino-foreign cultural differences and encourages open-ended thinking and the formation of new understandings of Chinese culture. For the remaining six themes, the key teaching activities focus on student groups' presentation of their short videos and peer assessment among the groups.

4.2 Integration of the Short Video Project

Short video creation is the most important process-oriented assessment task in this course. Students are divided into six groups, responsible for the introduction and comparative analysis of the remaining six cultural themes. This short video project is limited to 10 minutes and consists of two main parts, requiring English voiceover and English subtitles. In the first part, students are required to search for academic papers on CNKI or Web of Science, conduct literature review, and combine other research methods, such as interview, to demonstrate their in-depth and critical analysis of Sino-foreign cultural differences. The second part requires students to tell a Chinese cultural story related to the theme based on the comparative perspective with the aim to facilitate intercultural dialogue. The second part encourages students to produce original visual design. While appropriate English expressions and fluent narration are crucial in this task, it also highlights the importance of students' using the camera to record Chinese culture from their hometowns or in their daily lives.

4.3 Combination of Peer and Teacher Assessment

Evaluation combines peer and teacher assessments. After screening a group's video in class, its members are evenly distributed among the other five groups to further share their creative insights and reflections, while members of the other five groups provide face-to-face evaluations. Simultaneously, members of the other five groups write down open-ended comments and suggestions for revising the short video in an online shared assessment sheet. The sheet instructs students to offer feedback in these three aspects: Design of Linguistic and Visual Modes; Analysis of Sino-foreign Cultural Differences; Chinese Culture/Stories from the Perspective of Sino-foreign Cultural Dialogue. During this process, the teacher acts as an organizer and supervisor, moving among groups to monitor and observe the discussion. After all groups have completed the sheet, the teacher organizes a class discussion based on these peer assessments. After class, the teacher provides detailed written feedback on the three aspects in the same online shared assessment sheet. Student groups then revise their short videos according to students' and the teacher's comments and submit the final version of the video at the end of the semester as a summative assessment outcome. The teacher determines the final grade based on the ultimate video and conducts semi-structured interviews with group leaders to gain a deeper understanding of their reflection and revision process.

5 TEACHING OUTCOMES

5.1 Strengthening Cultural Identity and Confidence in Telling China's Stories

This multimodal assessment requires students not only to learn English expressions for Chinese culture from the textbook but also to record authentic cultural practices through visual storytelling. This approach transcends the conventional language-centered paradigm of foreign language education and deepens students' experiential understanding of cultural connotations and values so as to strengthen their identification with Chinese culture. In addition, by encouraging students to creatively combine linguistic and visual modes to represent Chinese culture, it enhances their confidence in effectively disseminating Chinese culture. In the course, the third group, who were responsible to introduce Chinese tea culture, visited the city of Chaoshan, as it is very famous for traditional tea culture in China and it is also the hometown of some members in the group. They proactively contacted a local historical tea house in Chaoshan, perfectly combining the six key steps of the Chinese tea ceremony introduced in the textbook with English narration and authentic footage of the tea house owner preparing Kung Fu tea. Furthermore, through panoramic shots of the quiet and comfortable tea house, they successfully represented the core spirit of the Chinese tea ceremony: "Harmony, Peace, Enjoyment, and Truth" (He, Jing, Yi, Zhen). The group leader mentioned in the interview, "Before this task, when reading the textbook or watching Chinese tea culture documentaries, I couldn't fully grasp how tea culture can reflect traditional Chinese culture. Expressing it in English makes me feel unnatural. But through this on-site investigation and the short video production, I genuinely experienced the uniqueness of 'tea culture.' Now I understand

why it is an important representative of Chinese civilization, and I feel more confident in explaining ‘Chinese tea culture’ to foreigners.” Through the multimodal composing strategy of making short video, the group not only gained a deeper identification with tea culture but also increased their confidence in disseminating Chinese tea culture internationally by coordinating linguistic and visual modes.

5.2 Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills about Cultural Differences

The course’s short video creation requires students to uncover the different social contexts and values behind the comparison of Chinese-foreign cultural differences, thereby improving their critical thinking skills on these differences. The fifth group, responsible for the theme of “Medicine”, scripted and filmed a classmate’s experience of visiting both a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) practitioner and a Western doctor. They vividly and meticulously presented the diagnostic features of TCM—the crucial Wang (Inspection), Wen (Listening/Smelling), Wen (Inquiring), and Qie (Palpation)—in visual form, while contrasting this with the Western medical diagnostic process using modern equipment and laboratory methods like stethoscopes, tongue depressors, and lab tests. This group also interviewed TCM and Western doctors at the university clinic. Based on interview materials and literature review, they summarized the underlying philosophical origins and values in English in the video: TCM is rooted in profound traditional Chinese philosophy, namely the concept of the unity of man and nature (Tian Ren He Yi), which posits that human beings, nature, and society form an indivisible life system. TCM is featured with a holistic perspective (Zheng Ti Lun), in which the human body is essentially indivisible, and an emphasis on relationships and experience. By contrast, western medicine, is rooted in atomism, believing that all things are composed of the smallest atoms, forming a concept of the human body as divisible into parts. It adheres to the belief that the constituent parts of a whole can exist as separate entities, with an emphasis of substance and experimentation, and has been strongly consolidated by the development of Western new scientific medicine since the 19th century. By combining interview materials, literature explanation, and dramatized visual representation, the group not only presented the differences between TCM and Western medicine in a vivid narrative but also deeply explored their distinct philosophical origins and historical reasons of scientific development, fostering a deep reflection on Chinese-foreign cultural differences.

5.3 Integrating Global Vision into the Dissemination of Chinese Culture

Besides comparison and critical thinking, the course aims to help students develop a global vision that promotes dialogue rather than opposition between cultures. The sixth group, responsible for the “Transportation” theme, used contrasting images of Russia’s outdated and congested rail system to showcase China’s rapid transportation development in their interim short video presentation. During the peer assessment, other groups questioned the authenticity of these contrasting images, noting they were mostly sourced from social media. In the interview, the group leaders admitted that they chose the Russian images because social media had consistently perpetuated a stereotypical image of Russia’s rail system as relatively backward, and using these images would better highlight Chinese transportation’s modernization and prosperity. After comments from other groups and reminders from the teacher, they realized that this angle for “telling China’s story” was “I-culture” centered, lacked empirical support, and, crucially, lacked a global vision of effective dialogue with other cultures. Such kind of visual story-telling was actually a monologue casting the foreign audience aside. In the revised final version, the group added video clips showing the historical development of China’s railways since the 1950s. Simultaneously, based on literature, they used texts and images to display Russia’s railway development over the past 30 years for comparison. More importantly, they filmed the real experience of group members taking high-speed rail and conducted a detailed interview with a Russian traveler at a high-speed rail station, revealing the progress and the improvement the Chinese railways could make. They also added commentary on how Chinese railways have learned from foreign experiences and what beneficial inspirations China’s railway development can bring to the international community. Through such revision, the students in this group recognized that in intercultural communication, while it is necessary to identify differences through comparison, it is more important to seek for common ground beyond differences and to integrate cultural dialogue into the narration of Chinese culture for effective dissemination.

6 THE CHALLENGES

6.1 Technical Challenges

Although students are all digital natives, not all of them are tech-savvy. According to the interviews, some students lacked the technical skills and found short video production difficult. For instance, regarding the video on Chinese cuisines from group 1, when they shot the scene of their members enjoying traditional Cantonese food in a restaurant, the angle was low and some of the group members’ heads were cut off the scene. They explained that it was their first time shooting in the public and they did not have a lot of experience of making videos. To solve this, the teacher established a Wechat group that is constituted by the students who are experts in producing short videos so that other students could join in and ask for help. A better solution could be sending out the questionnaire to investigate students’ skills and experiences of using AI and technology to make short videos at the beginning of the course. Based on the results of the questionnaire, students could make better decision of forming the group with members of different skills.

6.2 Assessment Challenges

During the peer assessment, students needed to make evaluation and give feedback to the short videos based on three aspects and some students found it quite challenging. On the one hand, it was hard for them to comment on the utility and coordination of the linguistic and visual modes in a short time. On the other hand, they were not confident to make critical comments. To solve this problem, the teacher allowed students to offer extra feedback after class in the online shared assessment form. A better solution will require the teachers to make a video showing how they assess the students' authentic video projects via clear rules and rubrics of assessment and send it to students online for self-study and mock assessment by themselves in the first week of the class.

7 CONCLUSION

This study, by integrating the digital multimodal composing assessment of short video project into the teaching reform of the intercultural course for English majors, has effectively enhanced students' intercultural awareness and competence combining "the love of family and country", a "global perspective", and the ability to disseminate Chinese stories. However, there were and are challenges for such teaching reform. Further theoretical exploration and practice on the intercultural teaching reform through the integration of digital multimodal composing pedagogy will, without doubt, help address the challenges and empower university intercultural courses to better respond to the development of globalism and China's new era mission of enhancing the international dissemination power of Chinese culture.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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