

# Cross-Cultural Multimedia Language Learning

AUSTRALIA / CHINA  
Language Training



## Good Practice Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>

Cross-cultural multimedia language learning is the new frontier to increase the skills of students. It is based on the use of the Internet and new forms of interaction made possible by Web 2.0 tools. This file describes how these technologies were used in a blended classroom in order to promote language learning, especially spoken language, together with intercultural exchange through synchronous and asynchronous tools for collaborative tasks.

The reference case study involved, together, 82 Chinese adult learners (aged 20-30), enrolled in a college that offers distance education via the Internet, in Shanghai, and 31 students (aged 18-22), enrolled in the graduate group, "Chinese media studies" (CMS), in Australia. The former were the participants of the online "Newspaper discussion" unit, focusing on current news; while the latter were interested in Chinese domestic and international news and current affairs. The laboratory was developed on reading and commenting current issues and news, both in Australian and in Chinese, in a virtual classroom created thanks to the Web 2.0 tools for interaction. The laboratories lasted from 13 to 15 weeks, with an average of 3 hours per week, in which students worked on multimedia texts and focused on skills-based media on the Internet.

The classes met in a Skype video conference, along with their instructors, for an informal initial presentation. Then, a group chat was created in order to allow students to communicate simultaneously. The teachers had produced the first multimedia files and recorded videos in which they had explained the basics of the tools used and the collaboration purposes of the classes. The video was included in the "FAQ" section, so that it could be watched several times. The classes learnt about how to use the tools, began to upload documents and edited them on a platform shared asynchronously. Teachers were also encouraged to stimulate the class comments, to upload documents and continue the work done in class during the other sessions.

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<sup>1</sup> The source for this Dossier is from: Ullrich, C., Borau, K., Grant, S., Jackson, D., Shen, R. (2010), *Cross-cultural multimedia language learning: case study and analysis*, in *Advances in web-based Learning - ICWL 2010*, Berlin / Heidelberg, Springer, p. 404-411.  
(ref.: <http://www.carstenullrich.net/pubs/Ullrich10Cross-Cultural.pdf>)

## 1. It is based upon a complete and up-to-date needs analysis.

The main goal of the cross-cultural multimedia language learning class was to stimulate students to practice the target language more actively than they had never done before. The used tool ("*VoiceThread*") was chosen because it offers several ways of producing multimedia content, in order to enable student to participate the way they found most comfortable with. The virtual presence of native speakers aimed at motivating the students by making the authoring tasks less artificial. The content production was useful to learn more about the other person, his/her culture, and so on. According to everyone's mental schemes, the students made use of the different input modalities: slide shows, pictures and videos, and also commented by text and voice.

## 2. It is focused on the acquisition of competencies identified on needs analysis.

The results of this experiment are interesting. Analyzing the numbers of comments in both groups, Chinese and Australian, it is to point out that: the Chinese are more interested in communication in general (37 times threads commented on Australian and Chinese threads 121 times), while the Australians are particularly interested in communicating with students Chinese (commented 3 times and 63 times the Australian discussion threads in Chinese).

For this reason, the results of the activity can be interpreted as follows: these interests may reflect the differences between the two disciplinary groups of students. Students taking courses in a traditional liberal arts program are required to demonstrate objective skills - papers, projects, and scholarship - whereas successful performance in business programs includes subjective interpersonal skills necessary for success in the business world.

The quality of the comments was different depending on the mode used. The Australians commented more often vocal contributions rather than textual ones, while the Chinese showed the opposite trend, often commenting on the text contributions. This is also a technical reason, considering that the program used did not allow to type Chinese characters. The consequence was that the Australians were forced to communicate with voice messages. On the contrary, the Chinese preferred text documents probably because they felt safer in writing that in pronunciation.

In the end, there is also a difference in the type of content of the threads that received more comments. Specifically, Chinese students commented more often (and almost exclusively) the Australian thread regarding personal matters, such as discussions about themselves and personal objectives. While Australian students showed a keen interest in impersonal topic threads posted by Chinese colleagues, such as social and political conversations.

### **3. Its objectives are realistic.**

This mode of cross-media distance relationship has the great advantage of allowing all students learning in a clear way, thus overcoming the psychological fear of making a mistake. The acquisition of language skills proceeds according to the learning capabilities of each, as it exploits the logic of informal exchange of information, focusing on collaborative knowledge.

### **4. It is based on an updated didactic framework.**

Technology-Enhanced Learning, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and Computer-Aided Language Learning are highly relevant and active areas of research in language learning studies. The use of tools such as chats, blogs, emails, audio and video conferences follows the dynamics of interaction taking place in the web world, stimulating the production of content by users, and allowing students to interact during learning, also allowing culture sharing.

Modern language learning principles focus on the importance of communicative competence and interaction in real, complete and authentic situations. The Internet, and the large amount of the social web tools, enhance communication and interaction among native speakers.

### **5. It incorporates some element of retroaction.**

The language courses took into account the student's level of interaction and possible problems arising from cultural differences. The objectives were achieved within the timeframe specified and managed to improve intercultural understanding with the attendance of sustainable courses.

### **6. It takes into account a maximal number of constraints: absence, diversity, time and place.**

The main goal of cross-cultural learning was achieved because the students actively participated in the practice of the target language. The multimedia nature of the interaction, thanks to the versatility of the instrument, allowed students to have different learning channels (visual, sound, text, interactive) and to fully practice the language. Encourage students to produce multimedia content allowed everyone to express in the most convenient way and making authoring operations less artificial: content was produced for participants of the same age and fully expressed their original culture.

The set of educational web tools used for Cross-Cultural Language Multimedia Learning had the objective to improve and implement the

participants' specific learning needs, according to the time available, the techniques and the skilfulness of teachers and students. For example, although each student expressed the desire to create a personal web page, it soon became clear that kind of tool was too long to be implemented, thus slide shows and videos were used to allow the creation of multimedia and personalized comments. This contributed to create a friendly online environment for sharing, interaction and contact between native speakers.

## 7. Transferability.

In sum, the cross-cultural learning model described is effective and versatile and could be easily transferred in any context of language learning. As a matter of fact, even though the students were somehow forced to communicate in the target language, the advantage was that they did not feel stressed, because they could communicate, informally above all, with their peers.

Some recommendations about the delivery and transferability of online activities, regarding this specific policy, are the following:

- teachers should preload materials before the live lessons or activities and previously record documents (importance of well planning the outline of the various meetings);
- access to statistics regarding the online activities by the participants is also important in order to better provide learning stimuli;
- teachers should make documents as public as possible in order to increase participants' motivation and interest in providing high-quality stuff;
- teachers should also be careful in monitoring online activities and stimulate students to participate.

There is no evidence that this specific policy has been transferred anywhere else, but there are hundreds of similar studies published on specialized journals describing experimental actions using Web 2.0 tools in language learning. Thus, what is important is not the tool and its functionalities, rather than the pedagogical patterns lying backwards the training activity.