Visual Literacy in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning: A study of Chinese Language Teachers’ Perceptions

Jui-Ling Chiang, with Cindy York

Department of Educational Technology, Research and Assessment, College of Education, Northern Illinois University

Introduction

Visual material has been used for a long time in language classroom settings to recall student memory of vocabulary, phrases, and sentences. Visual aids such as flashcards, posters, films, and photos are used in many language classrooms. In today’s education environment, computer technology is widely adapted into many language classrooms. Many language teachers use multimedia materials such as digital graphics, films, and video clips to demonstrate culture differences while teaching a foreign language.

Different from alphabet order language, Chinese language is a combination of tonal language and logographic language. The difficulty of learning a tonal language is because “a large number of homophones exist in the language creating difficulty especially in listening” as well as speaking (Hu, 2010, p. 104). The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of digital visual materials used among university Chinese language teachers in their listening and speaking classes.

Method

In this study, phone, Skype, and email were used to interview four language teachers, teaching at 4-year universities, who were using digital visual materials in their classes. Each interview was between 45-55 minutes. They were asked for digital visual material samples, both good and bad. Interview questions allowed for an understanding of their digital visual material experiences, including positive and negative experiences, student reactions, and instructor reaction towards ineffective digital visual material.

Research Questions

• What are the teachers’ knowledge of and preparation for using digital visual materials?
• What are the teachers’ perspectives on the use of digital visual materials during their classes?
• How do the teachers use digital visual materials in their classroom?
• How do university and college technology environments affect language teachers integrating technology into their classroom settings?

Significance

Teachers’ abilities for reading and interpreting the image must be able to cross cultural boundaries in which teachers have a need to read the images from students’ perspectives.

Therefore, this study aimed to:

a) Contribute to the use of multimedia dual-coding theory in foreign language classroom by gathering current language teachers’ experiences of utilizing digital visual materials and influence on their perceptions of the students’ learning.

b) Raise teachers’ attention of visual literacy abilities such as interpreting and selecting the images from American students’ perspectives while creating class materials.

Assertions

In order to elicit students’ interest in learning Chinese from their own understanding through multimedia, the researcher suggests:

1. Allow students to create their own language portfolio from in-class activities or assignments.

2. Allow on-screen text during the class to assist students’ enhancement of short term memory.

Research Questions

• What are the teachers’ knowledge of and preparation for using digital visual materials?
• What are the teachers’ perspectives on the use of digital visual materials during their classes?
• How do the teachers use digital visual materials in their classroom?
• How do university and college technology environments affect language teachers integrating technology into their classroom settings?

Significance

Teachers’ abilities for reading and interpreting the image must be able to cross cultural boundaries in which teachers have a need to read the images from students’ perspectives.

Therefore, this study aimed to:

a) Contribute to the use of multimedia dual-coding theory in foreign language classroom by gathering current language teachers’ experiences of utilizing digital visual materials and influence on their perceptions of the students’ learning.

b) Raise teachers’ attention of visual literacy abilities such as interpreting and selecting the images from American students’ perspectives while creating class materials.

Assertions

In order to elicit students’ interest in learning Chinese from their own understanding through multimedia, the researcher suggests:

1. Allow students to create their own language portfolio from in-class activities or assignments.

2. Allow on-screen text during the class to assist students’ enhancement of short term memory.

Findings of Digital Materials:

All participants mentioned that “one image with one message” is the key to assist students’ recall from memory of vocabulary.

Some participants used textbook images and some used real photos as context to guide students’ practice with Chinese.

Visual from Textbook

Visual from Personal Photo

Tracy said, “I love to use authentic photos. For example, I used the photo I took of the Space Needle in Seattle one time. My students told me they couldn’t recognize it because they’d never been there.”

All participants mentioned using exaggerated images to recall students’ memory of certain vocabulary such as “tall,” “short,” “fat,” “ugly,” and “busy.”

Exaggerated Image

Participant Christine said, “I know … students laugh at these pictures, but they also memorize these vocabulary better than others.”

Some participants used pictures with enough English text to guide practice, but some preferred to use cartoonish images with limited text.

Preference with pictures

Preference with cartoons

All participants stated they prefer to use more images and less text in their course materials. Three of them mentioned that if they added English text, students would translate the language.

All participants coincidently used YouTube clips to display holidays or calligraphy and used movie or music video to display daily life activities and behavior activities.

CULTURE MATERIAL

All participants mentioned that their students had more culture-related questions, such as daily activities or special holiday activities when they watched films.

Following is a drill & practice image that one participant used for four semesters. Only two students responded that, “this person changed from white to black.”

Participant Tracysaid with confused tone, “…I wonder what was in student’s mind when they read this set of image. Do they grasp the text better than images?”

Results of the Affect of Technology Environment in Language Teaching

Laura said, “Every classroom has a SMART Board, projector, microphone, speaker, video recorder, DVD player, VHS player, and document projector. We recorded every class and saved the video and class material to the intranet and shared them with students. I think it is very helpful for them to review each class.”

Christine was not as lucky as Laura. She said, “In my class, I use my own laptop. Actually, my school provides teachers laptops, but I have to share it with other three instructors. So I decided to use my own laptop … but I have to carry it to school EVERYDAY and sometimes I feel I don’t want to use it [digital materials].”

Tracy responded, “I rely on using PowerPoint to guide my students with a lot practice. But I had a bad experience of the instructor station being attacked by a virus. After that, I bring my own laptop and also add regular flashcards in my class.”

Gina had a technology transition period. She said, “My first year didn’t have a SMART Board. Students hated to write on the whiteboard, so I have less in-class activities. But now they like the SMART Board. It’s easy to use, and I can use it to mix traditional flashcards with PowerPoint or play a DVD. It is convenient!”