*Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting How Africans Interpret*

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# Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting How Africans Interpret Instructional Materials and Chinese as a Foreign Language

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to determine the influence of socio-cultural differences in the interpretation of Chinese Language Instructional Materials (CLIM) by African students.

**Methodology:** The paper used a desk study review methodology where relevant empirical literature was reviewed to identify main themes and to extract knowledge gaps.

**Conclusion:** The study concluded that there are adequate Chinese language instructional materials at Stellenbosch University but they contain culturally unfamiliar elements for the African learners. In addition, many textbooks for foreign languages include cultural references that are foreign to their students. Because of the cultural differences, the information presented in the course materials is less easily understood. Students at Stellenbosch can be said to have an optimistic outlook on Chinese in general

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** The study recommended that the introductory topics in the Chinese language curriculum emphasize more on teaching of the Chinese culture. Also, efforts should be made to localize the learning resources for a more effective teaching of the language. The Chinese language curriculum could place greater emphasis on helping African students gain an appreciation for Chinese culture in its foundational or introductory materials. CFL course requirements in universities should also be examined in light of the foregoing

## INTRODUCTION

English and Kiswahili are the official and national languages of Africa, but there are over 40 other languages and dialects spoken across the continent (Appel & Mysken, 2017). French, German, Chinese, Italian, and Japanese are just some of the many foreign tongues that are taught in African schools. The majority of Chinese people use Chinese as their first language. As a result of the large number of Chinese immigrants to South America, the language is also widely spoken in Eastern Asia (Masayoshi, 2020).

Approximately one thousand students are learning Chinese in Africa, making the continent a leader in the expansion of Chinese language education in sub-Saharan Africa. Some African students study Chinese as their first foreign language, while others who already know Spanish, French, Italian, German, or Japanese study it as their second. Some four-year universities and many two-year colleges offer courses in the language, primarily to meet the needs of the travel and hospitality industries.

Due to the limited exposure to the language outside of school, most Africans who study Chinese rarely use it in everyday life. As a result, students have a hard time acquiring sufficient linguistic and communicative skills because of the low rate at which they retain the language. According to Krashen and Terrell (2022), the goal of teaching a language is to help the student grasp it in contexts beyond the classroom so that he or she can eventually apply what they've learned both in and out of the classroom. According to Thorndike (2019), the principle of frequency should be applied to instructions for maximum learning. According to this idea, repetition is the key to learning and retaining information, and a single exposure to a new concept or practice is usually not enough for the human mind to retain, evaluate, and apply it.

The linguistic and cultural distance between the learner's native language and Chinese can slow the learning process, just as it can for any other foreign language. The teaching of the four linguistic abilities—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—should always include an emphasis on culture (Kramsch, 2022). Kramsch argues that the presence of culture in the classroom constantly unsettles students and places artificial boundaries on their language skills.

Learner motivation is greatly aided by instructional materials (Broussard & Garrison, 2015). In order to effectively convey the language content, the teacher must first locate appropriate instructional materials. The learner's social and cultural context should be factored into the development of learning materials. Students of a language use mental models of their own culture to make sense of what they read in textbooks and other forms of educational media (Anderson, 2015). Sometimes the information in the instruction materials does not relate to what exists in the culture of the students studying Chinese in Africa, leading to difficulties in decoding and ultimately to unmet objectives. Having information in the curriculum that is heavily based on Chinese culture can lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation on the part of students, which in turn can lead to a loss of interest in learning the language.

According to Maley (2016), when a teacher introduces a new textbook or handout for language instruction, they must take into account the fact that students' perceptions of the material will vary depending on their own cultural backgrounds. As a result, educational resources created in one cultural context may be interpreted in a very different way by learners from another culture.

Therefore, the sociocultural background of the intended users is a crucial factor to consider when designing language instructional materials.

## Statement of the Problem

Despite the fact that many African schools now offer Chinese classes, only a small percentage of students have succeeded in going beyond the beginner level of proficiency. According to a 2013 report by China Educational Exchange Services, while there is a relatively large number of people who take the basic level of the Chinese Proficiency Test, the number of people who take the advanced level is vanishingly small. As culture is the backdrop of every language classroom activity, low participation at higher levels may be due to poor past performances, which may be attributed to socio-cultural differences (Kramsch, 2022).

The decisions made by the designers of the curriculum are based on their own views of how they think the language should be taught. For the purpose of teaching the language to non-Chinese speakers all over the world, Chinese language instructional materials (CLIM) are created in China by experts in the field. Learners may have trouble grasping the concepts presented in these resources, however, due to socio-cultural differences.

## Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study was to establish the instructional materials used in teaching Chinese language.

## Significance of the Study

This study's findings shed light on how a linguistic and cultural divide affects Africans' ability to learn Chinese. As a result, educators and curriculum designers will have a better understanding of how to tailor their lessons to African culture, an element that is often disregarded or given insufficient weight. As a result, Chinese language education in Africa will become more purposeful and relevant, leading to higher levels of proficiency among students. It follows that students, teachers, and designers of Chinese language curricula will gain the most from this research. Due to the universality of the phenomenon, the insights gained can also be used to improve the quality of instruction in other foreign languages where cultural aspects in instructional materials for the target language are used.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Instructional Methods

Lesson objectives can only be achieved through the implementation of instructional methods. Learner engagement can be maintained through the use of a variety of teaching strategies in an effective instructional approach (Asher, 2019). There is a current movement in the field of education known as "learner-centered" or "active learning," in which students are encouraged to collaborate on group projects like problem-solving, argument analysis, and hypothesis generation with their classmates. With a learning-centered approach, the teacher steps back from being the sole source of knowledge and instead acts as a guide for their students as they discover concepts on their own.

Larsen-Freeman (2020) explains that teachers who are well-versed in and make use of a variety of strategies are better able to make the most of their resources and adapt quickly to new or unforeseen circumstances. Teachers who have more training and experience are better able to adapt their methods to the specific needs of their students, as stated by (Arends, 2018). Question-and-answer drills, substitution drills, dictation, listen-and-repeat, read-the-passage-and-fill-in-the-blanks, and conversation drills are all commonplace in language classrooms. Different approaches can be equally effective for dealing with specific issues, and teachers should encourage their students to solve problems together while speaking the target language.

**Cultural Elements in Chinese Language Instructional Materials**

Educators should always be looking for ways to tap into their students' innate drive to succeed. Therefore, in order to effectively convey information to students, teachers employ a wide range of instructional resources. It is challenging to design locally appropriate instructional materials for the Chinese language in Africa, and there are almost no resources available locally, that reflect authentic natural patterns of grammar and speech and fit the goals of a sequential Chinese language program. As a result, many Chinese language classroom resources come directly from China. Print, visual, audio, and audio-visual media are the most common forms of the materials, and they all contain essential elements for teaching the language and culture. The goal of these materials is to help non-native speakers of the language learn the language and become more fluent in it. All of the decisions made in creating these resources stem from the designers' own ideas about what language is and how it should be taught.

The vast majority of textbook authors are native speakers of the target language, and as such, their perspectives, values, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions are inevitably reflected in the books they write (Alptekin, 2021). Therefore, we can say that the views, values, beliefs, attitudes, and ideas of the instructional material designers and developers are a reflection of their culture. Therefore, not only linguistic but also cultural consideration and debate are relevant to the words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, pictures, drawings, and all other language forms used in the teaching of foreign languages.

**Empirical Review**

Lavrenteva and Orland-Barak (2023) conducted a study on employing literature on coursebook analysis and evaluation and informed by the research on multimodality in language teaching materials, this study proposed a conceptual-analytical framework for exploring how cultural meaning is conveyed in foreign language teaching materials through the way in which text, task, and image combine in a learning activity. Through the application of the proposed framework, we explored cultural representations found in texts, students' meaning-making opportunities guided by tasks as well as alignments and potential contradictions between verbal and visual messages by analyzing images. In doing this, we attempted to evaluate the potential of language teaching materials to cater for diverse groups of learners within a given socio-cultural context. In our investigation, we drew on two types of coursebook evaluation - micro-evaluation and macro-evaluation which were supplemented by the deductive content analysis. They illustrated how the proposed framework might help teachers evaluate the effectiveness

of coursebooks' use of multiple representations to support student learning and meaning-making.

Mavuru and Ramnarain (2020) conducted a study on learners' social-cultural backgrounds and science teaching and learning. The study investigated how teachers' knowledge of learners' socio-cultural backgrounds is invoked in enacting various teaching and learning approaches that bring relevance of science to learners. Three science teachers from three township high schools were observed teaching while incorporating learners' socio-cultural practices, experiences and beliefs when teaching the topics reproduction, nutrition and healthy diet. The teachers were interviewed after each lesson via a closed-ended protocol. Science local curriculum documents and lesson plans were also analyzed. A total of five lesson observations and five post-lesson interviews per teacher were analyzed using the constant comparative method. The findings revealed that teachers use probing and open-ended questions, argumentation in groups, authentic problem-solving activities and resources, examples, experiences and language familiar to learners. Such practices promote class and group interaction, develop critical and analytical thinking skills in learners and promote conceptual understanding. The research findings provide insights into how certain science topics can be taught in meaningful ways to socio-economically and culturally diverse learners, which can contribute to the current debate on relevant education in a country faced with huge diversity.

Wen *et al*. (2018) examined the influx of international students to China in recent years and the corresponding internationalization strategies in the higher education sector. Data from a nationwide census of international students and the Survey of International Students' Experience and Satisfaction suggest that China is gradually becoming a key higher education destination for developing countries, particularly for students from neighboring Asian countries. Major challenges for international students include limited English resources, inadequate student-faculty interaction on campus, and difficulties in socio-cultural adjustment. This study outlines the key strengths and limitations of the internationalization of higher education in China and also provides directions for future research in this regard.

Wamuti *et al*. (2016) examined the influence of culture in the interpretation of Japanese language instructional material. This paper discussed the influence of cultural elements on interpretation of the information in Japanese Language Instructional Materials (JLIM) by Kenyan students. This paper was based on the results of a pilot study carried out among college Japanese students in Kenya. The research was guided by schema theory, which described the process by which readers refer to their own background knowledge in order to comprehend new information. Data was collected through a questionnaire. The results of the study showed that unfamiliar cultural elements in the instructional materials negatively influence the interpretation of information. It was therefore recommended that the design of language instructional materials should take into consideration the culture of the learners.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to

field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

## FINDINGS

The results were grouped into various research gap categories namely as conceptual, contextual, and geographical.

The research presented a contextual gap since the literature did not make it clear how frequently cultural elements in Chinese language textbooks are misunderstood. There is also a dearth of written material that addresses the topic of Chinese language education in Africa. Furthermore, there are no other comparable studies conducted in Africa or in Africa that can be used as a point of reference. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to fill in those blanks.

Wamuti, Bwire and Ndethiu (2016) study that examined the influence of culture in the interpretation of Japanese language instructional material. Was limited to Japanese language and therefore the need to replicate the study in Chinese language. Their study also established a methodological gap since they used a pilot study among college Japanese students, whereas our current study used a desk study method. Also, their research was based on theories.

In addition, a conceptual gap can be identified from the research, for example in the study carried out by (Lavrenteva & Orland-Barak, 2023), illustrated how the proposed framework might help teachers evaluate the effectiveness of coursebooks' use of multiple representations to support student learning and meaning-making. Our study sort to determine the influence of socio-cultural differences in the interpretation of Chinese language instructional materials by African students.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusion

The study's results suggest that the Chinese language resources offered by Stellenbosch University are sufficient, but that they may contain some elements that are unfamiliar to African students learning Chinese. In addition, students at Stellenbosch who are learning Chinese have access to a range of tried-and-true methods of interactive learning. Although the teachers have a firm grasp on the Chinese language, they are woefully inadequate when it comes to understanding the Chinese culture.

In addition, many textbooks for foreign languages include cultural references that are foreign to their students. Because of cultural differences, the information presented in the course materials is less easily understood. Students at Stellenbosch can be said to have an optimistic outlook on Chinese in general.

### Recommendations

The cultural differences between the target language and the culture of the learner should be considered by textbook writers and the creators of foreign language learning materials. Teachers of a foreign language should have a solid grounding in the culture of the country where their

students will be studying. Chinese language schools in Africa should create lessons that are tailored to the culture of their students if they want to increase the number of students who succeed in learning Chinese.

The Chinese language curriculum could place greater emphasis on helping African students gain an appreciation for Chinese culture in its foundational or introductory materials. CFL course requirements in universities should also be examined in light of the foregoing.

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