Informational Technology Assists the Teaching and Learning of Chinese as a Second Language:
The Case of Cross-Cultural Learners' Magazine (CCLM)

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Abstract: In Hong Kong, catering for the different learning needs of culturally diverse non-Chinese speaking (NCS) secondary students in the Chinese language classroom has recently become a pressing challenge to the teachers. This paper presents a case study of using information technology for assisting teaching and learning of Chinese as a second language (CSL) by situating students in a natural learning environment. Our research team launched an online creative project named Cross-Cultural Learners' Magazine (CCLM) based on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and social learning theories. Students' written and multimedia works on cultural issues were published on various social media, thus creating an online learning platform and a rich source of mental age and life experience matched authentic Chinese materials for CSL curriculum and assessment development. Teachers' and students' feedback indicate that CCLM has been successful in motivating NCS students' for CSL learning and language socialization within the local Chinese-dominated society.

Key-words: Chinese as a Second Language (CSL), Information Technology (IT)-assisted learning, social media, second language acquisition, authentic materials, learner's motivation, cross-cultural communication

1 Introduction

Hong Kong is one of the world's leading cities with global presence. People from different countries come to this Special Administration Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China for business and careers. As a Chinese-dominated society, 94.6% of Hong Kong population is ethically Chinese, while the remaining 6.4% is known as ethnic minorities (EM), who are ethnically and linguistically non-Chinese. In general, the ethnic minority population includes people from mainly South and Southeast Asia, particularly India, Pakistan, Nepal, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand.

Many of them made a decision to settle down in Hong Kong, hoping that their younger generation can eventually integrate into Hong Kong society and have a bright future through education.

In the last few years, the number of EM students has sharply increased. According to the 2011 Population Census Report (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2012), the number of EM students was 23,444 in 2006, and it rose to 32,800 in 2011. Almost 80% of these EM students attend schools mainly serve EM students (under the category "designated schools" before the 2013-14 academic year), while some of them go to the schools serving mainly the

Chinese-speaking students (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2008).

Such diversity in student population results in culturally mixed classrooms with students of different learning needs and abilities. Given the new policy of abolishing "designated schools" and encouraging EM (or non-Chinese speaking [NCS] as a broader concept, which includes ethnically Chinese returnees and other ethnic groups with weak historical ties to the territory) enrolment in traditionally Chinese-dominated mainstream schools, many teachers are less than equipped for teaching classes with high internal diversity, especially the Chinese language teachers. As they have been used to teaching Chinese as a first language (L1), they do not necessarily possess the knowledge and awareness essential to the facilitation of effective CSL teaching and learning, leading to difficulties and frustration in certain cases (Chan, 2013).

Worse still, many NCS students have little exposure to the local Chinese society and hence few opportunities of engaging in direct communication with local Chinese people (Kwan, 2012; Lam et al., 2014). Oftentimes, these students speak with their family and friends in their own mother tongue(s), and seldom actively read Chinese books, magazines, or on the web. Such a literacy gap has led to further social seclusion, keeping these students within the "comfort zone" of their own ethnic and/or linguistic communities with minimal input of Chinese, the territory's *lingua franca*. At the same time, local Chinese people do not know about these NCS students as well. This is because they do not have many opportunities to get along. A lot of misunderstandings were occurred.

This paper intends to present a case of using information technology (IT) to assist the teaching and learning of CSL. The online creative project, the Cross-Cultural Learners' Magazine (CCLM), is operated across various social media and aims to provide opportunities for secondary students, particularly the NCS students, to share their life experiences and cultural insights to their peers in the form of text, photograph, and multimedia. This paper highlights the objectives, concept, design and operation of CCLM, which should serve as a reference case for fellow educators regarding the construction of a constructive-authentic learning environment for CSL learning.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Language Socialization

Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) suggest that language learning is a continuous process which includes both linguistic and sociocultural knowledge. Meanwhile, studies indicate that socialization and cultural knowledge of the target language society is also essential for the language learners as it provides a wider range of language learning opportunities. Duff (2010) defines language socialization as the process of "linguistic, pragmatic and other cultural knowledge" acquisition through social interaction that leads to the development of "cultural and communicative competence". She points out that language socialization is the process through which learners explore the underlying and implicit rules of communication and interaction using the target language in a society. The learner should be aware of the language practices in a society in order to be able to function according to the norms of that society (Duff, 2010, p.427).

Duff (2009) found that English language learners from different cultural backgrounds often struggle in classroom interactions and discussions due to the non-existence of the concept of classroom discussion in their own cultures, implying that cultural differences and classroom environment play a key factor in shaping language learners and their attitudes. In the same vein, Shi (2007) states that the "sociocultural ecology of home, community, school or workplace" also creates difference in second language learners' communicative practices by constructing and reconstructing the learners' interactive routines and strategies (Shi, 2007). Therefore, it would be necessary to explore the diverse cultural background of such learners, so as to provide them with a constructive learning environment.

2.2 IT in Language Education

Many researchers in second language acquisition (SLA) consider that the use of technology and social interaction in language classes enhance students' language learning ability (Bahrani, 2011; del Puerto & Gamboa, 2009; Long, 1996; Milton, 2002; Pica, 1987; Rovai, 2001; Wang, Sierra, & Folger, 2003). Today, technology is used in every school for teaching and learning, which the students enjoy (Moqbel & Rao, 2013). The use of technology is getting popular in foreign language learning classes. Leloup & Ponterio (2003) point out that the relationship between technology and second language learning tends to focus on motivation, reading and writing, research, and mobile-assisted language learning. The integration of technology into second language teaching and learning can in turn improve learners' language learning ability, while technologies and applications have allowed the students to become more independent, motivated and active language learners. There are various subsets of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), including mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), Internet-based language learning (IBLL), online language learning (OLL), technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) and Google-assisted language learning (GALL), all of which enhance the development of higher order thinking, creativity, research skills, and also promotes social interaction and learning (Ringstaff & Kelley, 2002) and provide motivation to the students to maintain their language ability even outside the classroom (Gardner, Lalonde, Moorcroft, & Evers, 1985).

Crook (1994) proposes three principle metaphors on Computer-assisted language learning (CALL), namely Computer-as-tutor, Computer-as-pupil, and Computer-as-tool. Computer-as-tutor refers to a structuralist approach to foreign language learning, taking a drill-and-memorization approach that provides prompt correct responses or immediate feedback. The limitation, however, is that the emphasis on rote memorization and drill does not keep track of how learners learn a language or what they can do with that language.

The Computer-as-pupil metaphor is theoretically grounded in *cognitive frameworks* of language learning, with the emphasis in the individual psycholinguistic processes underlying language acquisition. According to Kern and Warschauer (2000) the computer provides tools and resources for learning, while the learners are left to decide how they are used in a simulated environment. The limitation is that despite its provision of a virtual reality environment and opportunity for the learners to interact with the programmed characters, it often distances the teacher from students and compromises the collaborative nature of classroom learning (Crook, as cited in Kern & Warschauer, 2000).

The Computer-as-tool concept refers to the combination of technological developments (e.g. computer networking) and theoretical developments in approaches to language pedagogy (e.g. emphasis on meaningful communication in authentic discourse contexts) within sociocognitive/sociocultural framework of language learning. This framework focuses not on using the computer to replace the teacher (i.e. computer-as-tutor or computer-as-pupil), but using the computer and other technologies to enhance language teaching within the broader context of the collaborative classroom by expanding the opportunities students have to communicate with other people. According to Kern and Warschauer (2000), sociocognitive approaches to CALL shift the dynamic from learners' interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computer. In this context, computer is viewed as a tool to facilitate human interaction and collaborative language learning.

2.3 Social Media Language Learning

The capacity of technology to serve as a means of facilitating human interaction and communication is one of the cornerstones of sociocognitive/sociocultural approach to CALL research and practice. The focus on form approach to language learning (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991) emphasizes drawing learners' attention to their own language, which, within the sociocultural framework, refers to language learners' engagement in e-partnering exchanges, where they comment on each other's language use or where non-native speakers are paired with native speakers who constantly provide peer

assistance (Bedmar & Paredes, 2012; Moqbel & Rao, 2013).

With the advancement of information technology, the internet has become a crucial element of language learning process. Dukes (2005) states that technology is an effective language teaching and learning tool because it meets the different learning styles and student needs, while providing authentic learning materials and activities which are relevant to the real world and creating a positive, supportive and open learning environment, enabling more interactions among language learners and native speakers of target language in the cyberspace, a case being connection via social networking sites.

Social networking websites and online games have become extremely popular among different age groups. People have free access to social networking websites, or social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and YouTube to share their ideas, messages, pictures and videos with each other. Besides sharing texts, pictures and videos, today's social network has become a form of "expression, interaction and community building" (Chartrand, 2012). Nowadays, as most of the students have their own smartphones, computers, laptops, and tablet computers, they are constantly connected to their friends via social media.

Krashen (1981)'s input hypothesis proposes that comprehensible input, while his affective filter hypothesis further hypothesizes that learners learn better in a positive environment without embarrassment or fear. Researchers generally believe that social media make useful tools for language teaching and learning because it engages and inspires the learners to use the target language (Beauvois, 1998 cited in Millis, 2011; Lindzey, Gilbert, & Fiske, 1998). It also helps to minimize the learners' fear and anxiety. According to Harrison and Thomas (2009), the use of online social networks promotes active language learning as both teachers and learners can participate in a collaborative learning environment, which provides opportunities for interaction and better communication. Other studies also suggest that social media, which are online social networks in essence, engage

second language learners in "community participation and identity construction" (Rheinhardt & Zander, 2011).

Studies also reveal that constant communication and interaction between L1 and L2 learners promotes language learning. Toohey (1998) echoes Krashen and argues that second language learners, if made to feel like "outsiders and illegitimate users of a language", might be deprived of their prospects for longer-term language learning success and they may be demotivated to language learning. In the context of Hong Kong, local Chinese teachers and students might encounter difficulty in communicating with NCS students due to cultural and linguistic differences, which oftentimes leads to identity crises among NCS students. These NCS students might find themselves lonely, vulnerable, neglectedand discriminated by local students. To enhance learning effectiveness and promote better understanding, teachers should provide suitable learning opportunities to NCS students where they can interact with local students and express themselves in Chinese language. Teacher can assign group activities and task-based projects to the students, in which mutual understanding between the NCS and local students can be enhanced for better social integration (Bird, Klein, Loper, & Baldridge, 2004; Chan 2012, 2013; Hong Kong Unison, 2013). Therefore, to provide access and participation to learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991) teachers can use social network to connect them (students) in to one community where they can learn and interact with each other freely.

3 Cross-Cultural Learners' Magazine (CCLM): A Case of Using IT For Assisting CSL Teaching and Learning

3.1 Objectives and Design

The University-School Support Programme: Supporting Secondary Schools in the Teaching and Learning of Chinese for Non-native Learners (USP SEC), a government-sponsored

school support project under the Faculty of Education, the University of Hong Kong launched an online creative project entitled Cross-Cultural Learners' magazine (CCLM) (http://usp.cacler.hku.hk/wordpress/) in the academic year 2012-13 (as part of the former "Cross-Cultural Independent Enquiry Study Award Scheme"). CCLM's main objectives lie in creating an open access online platform for intercultural learning, as well as promoting mutual understanding between NCS and Chinese-speaking students. The USP learning community team operates this online magazine in collaboration with partnership schools and Chinese subject teachers working with NCS students.

As a wordpress-based independent learning platform, CCLM takes an interdisciplinary approach that language socialization through communication takes place not only in the immediate or local context but also historical and cultural contexts with specific social beliefs and values (Ochs 2002; Schieffelin & Ochs 1986), and provides opportunities for language and cultural exchange among secondary students in Hong Kong. The design and operation of the online learning platform benefits from the convenience of sharing online cultural knowledge, which presents interesting and even compelling opportunities for intercultural exchange, agentive action and language learning, while receiving assistance and information from other parties by cooperatively engaging in situational responsive language use (Chartrand, 2012; Shi, 2007; Thorne, 2010) (See Fig. 1).
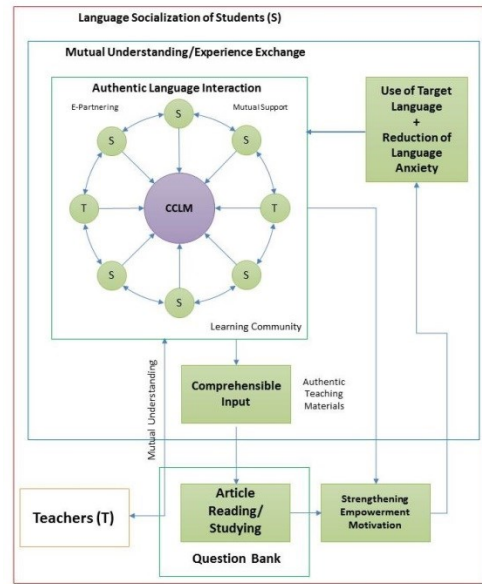

Fig. 1 The CCLM Project: A Perceptual Map

As the name suggests, this magazine helps to connect the students from different cultural background through language and various genres of art, including creative writing (prose, poetry, translation) with different themes (see Fig. 2), artwork (origami, paintings, photographic works), and multimedia productions (videos and animations) for showcasing their talents, sharing their thoughts and life experiences. Both students and teachers have free access. They can create their own user account, become subscribers of the magazine and comment on each other's work. CCLM also has an official Facebook page (see Fig. 5) where teachers and students are posted with updates and news updates about the magazine, such as highlights of the new submissions, cultural insights and the latest NCS-related activities. The CCLM learning community team receives and edits submissions before publishing them on the online platform. The student writers will receive a certificate of merit once their submissions have been published.

Another focus of CCLM is encourage NCS students to use their target language, i.e. Chinese both inside and outside of the Chinese language classroom. Based on the second language acquisition hypotheses and theories stating that exposure and participation in constructivist-authentic social interactions and

with the scaffolding offered by the authentic reading input written by both the experts or more competent peers (Krashen 1981; Li 2000), student writers who are mostly students of USP SEC's partnership schools are encouraged to share their personal experiences, stories and ideas in this public space around popular themes like foodways, cultural differences, festivals, family, sports, and education in either text form (see Fig. 3) or multimedia (see Fig. 4). Their peers and teachers are encouraged to respond to these creative works by submitting online comments.

The text-based submissions, in turn, serve as a rich source of authentic materials the teaching and learning of CSL for NCS students. USP SEC has made an experimental move in the academic year 2013-14 by building an online question bank with GCSE level reading comprehension assessment tools and exercises by adapting students' CCLM submissions, and the success should encourage teachers adopt the good practice modeled on Krashen's second language acquisition (SLA)-related hypotheses and language socialization theories. Teachers play a key role in empowering NCS students to participate in this magazine. Their participation in the magazine, as either a reader or mentor, providing psychosocial support to the NCS students and will lead even the most timid ones to find confidence in expressing their own feelings in the target language.

Fig.2 CCLM's Categorization of Submissions

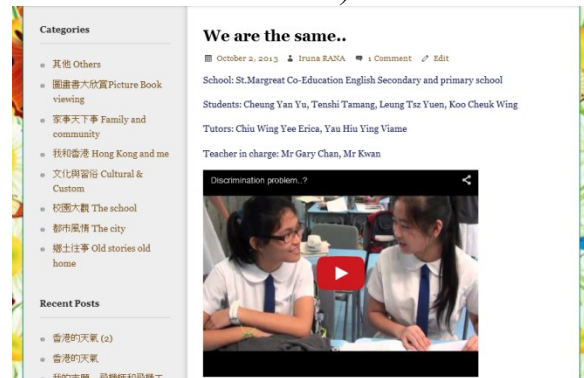*Fig. 3 Sample of Students' Submission (in Chinese)*

Fig. 4 Sample of Students' Submission (Multimedia)

Fig. 5 CCLM Facebook Page

3.2 Implementation Effects

CCLM started accepting submissions from the second term of the academic year 2012-13, the number of students' submissions published online so far totaled 105, including 101 creative writing pieces and 4 multimedia productions, under six major themes (i.e. "Family and Community", "Hong Kong and Me", "Cultural and Custom", "The School", "The City", and "Old Stories Old Home"). The authentic materials sourced from the students' written submissions have been adapted into 449 sets of Chinese language assessment questions for GCSE level, forming the basis of a project-based

question bank with 84 teacher subscribers to date. The teachers' and students' feedback will be detailed in the following subsections, i.e. Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2.

3.2.1 Teachers' Feedback

In the academic year 2013-14, the Learning Cluster on the CCLM-based Question Bank received an overall satisfaction rating 3.71 (Highest rating: 4), with individual ratings on relevance to work and practicality being 3.89 and 3.75 respectively. 96% of the participants stated that they would make use of the Question Bank for assisting their CSL teaching in the immediate or near future.

Teachers who participated in the CCLM project have also reported positive feedback on the implementation effects of this online project. They recognized that using IT to assist Chinese as a second language teaching and learning is an effective way to support NCS students' personal growth, as well as to promote mutual understanding among students and teachers alike from different language, ethnic and cultural background:

(1) Students' personal growth: Teachers indicated that as a popular, state-of-the-art means of communication among students, technology is a "good way to enhance their talent and creativity". As a result, the teachers believe that "they (their students) should be encouraged to make good use of it especially for learning purposes" (Original Words from Teacher A, a Chinese language teacher specializing in CSL for NCS students).

(2) Promote cultural understanding: Teachers who joined this CCLM often mentioned that the online learning platform makes a good learning community. In Teacher A's words, CCLM has been successful in providing "a great opportunity for the students to express themselves in public, [and they] can gain new experiences and exposure to different cultures". Participating teachers also found that the CCLM help teachers to understand their students for it provides a "common platform for all the people to share their stories and learn different culture and language".

However, these teachers also pointed out the limitation of the CCLM, i.e. the scope and

target users. Teacher A, for example, claimed that "[m]ost importantly [CCLM] needs promotion among students (not just USP partnership schools but also other schools working with NCS students), and needs to invite and target [at] different age group[s] or audience such as university students, parents and teachers to share their ideas".

3.2.3 Feedback from Students

NCS students who have submitted creative works to the CCLM also reported positive feedback on the implementation effects of the online learning platform. They claimed that it is very helpful for facilitating cultural exchange and building up their self-confidence in CSL learning:

(1) Students' empowerment: Student A stated that it was a new experience for her. In her original words, "I have never actually published any article so I think it was a great honor. [F]or the people to know like some other stories then I think they will be motivated [to] experience such thing[s] in their life ahead too". Her fellow student contributor, Student B, claimed that CCLM provided a good opportunity for NCS students to share feelings on a platform where "there is someone who we (the NCS students) [are] really interested there [and] wants to listen and see."

(2) Promote mutual understanding: Student A claimed that "[one] really don't get to talk to those local Chinese people like [in] a deep way what we are thinking about their culture, or maybe they are afraid to express in front of us […] And we can get to know and understand their viewpoint[s] as well and they can also [read] and [come up with] some […] mutual understanding in a way". Her fellow contributor, Student B, also agreed that CCLM "[would lead] them to think in different perspectives and a broader way, [or else] they will be thinking in [only] one perspective which is [too] subjective I think. We need to have broader mindset and understand different various cultures as well".

(3) Opportunities of CSL usage: The students agreed that social media such as Facebook, Twitter are "popular among my friends […] especially Facebook and YouTube,

[where] we can get a lot of information and use […] for communication […] with my teacher, for research, [and] for some of my homework." (Student B). Student A claimed that such online learning platform encouraged them and "it depend[s] on us if we take this opportunity or not" to become one of those who "have motivation or […] show interest in doing so [expressing themselves in Chinese."
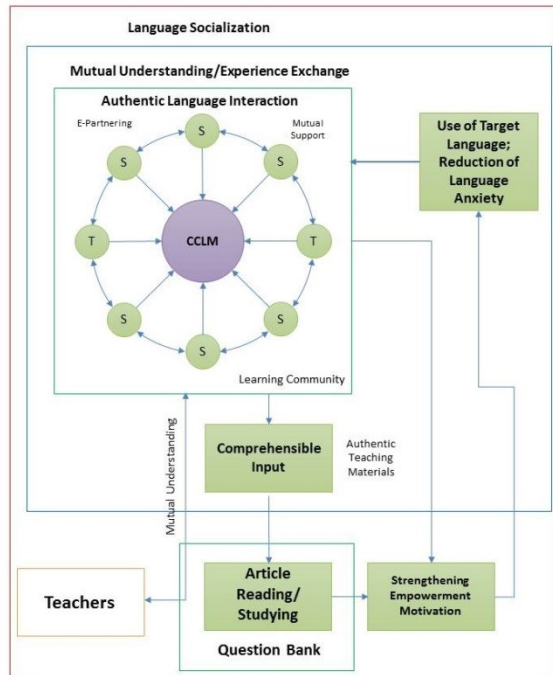

Fig. 5 The CCLM Project: A Perceptual Map

4 Conclusion

With the significant increase in the number of NCS students in mainstream schools in Hong Kong, Chinese language teachers and students are faced with the challenge of teaching and learning in culturally and academically diverse classrooms. To cater for their different learning styles and needs, mutual understanding of NCS students' cultural background and life experiences would in many ways benefit both the teachers and the students. Besides, to address the issue of insufficient exposure to the Chinese language in daily settings among NCS student in this traditionally plural Hong Kong society, which is a hindrance to advancing their Chinese

proficiency, there is a pressing need to engage these students in social interaction and communication in the target language.

Cross-Cultural Learners' Magazine (CCLM) was introduced with an aim to provide both language input and cultural knowledge to the NCS and Chinese students alike, while involving teachers as reader-mentors. As an online platform accepting creative submissions in various media including text, image and multimedia, it has been successful in connecting both the NCS and Chinese students through online interactions where they can share their personal views and experiences with each other.

CCLM has also fulfilled its primary objective to create an authentic learning environment for both Chinese language learning and cross-cultural communication. Through its award scheme, students are given an opportunity to publish their own works online with support of their own language teachers, and they are awarded certificates for their submissions for their effort. This provides incentives to the NCS students to learn Chinese language in an authentic way outside classroom. Their works are in turn adapted as reading comprehension assessment tools and exercises which allow the teachers to make use of these mental age- and life experience-matched authentic materials for curriculum development, which further involve the students in the learning community as the proactive players.

Past research has suggested that technology can provide authentic learning environment for students, particularly the second language learners. In addition to traditional pedagogies, information technology allows teachers to create interesting and engaging learning environments where content knowledge and personal growth can be augmented at the same time. With sustained support for teacher's use of technology (Moqbel & Rao, 2013), the potential of IT-assisted second language teaching and learning, particularly in the emerging area of CSL, will be allowed to be further explored and revealed for enhanced pedagogical effectiveness and integrity.

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