



# A study of language, culture, and identity in technology-assisted video presentations of international students learning Chinese as a second language

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**Abstract.** This paper reports a study in a technology-assisted Chinese teaching context where one major teaching objective is to encourage international students to participate in speech contests with the theme of ‘Tell China, Tell Your Stories’. Results showed that through four weeks’ preparation, all the students had a more robust method for presentation delivery and video making than before the project. Moreover, meeting conventional presentation standards was not only an issue of ‘language learning’, but also an issue of identity construction and negotiation. Finally, all participants had constructed positive ecocultural identities which encouraged respect for individuals, collaborative working, and a sustainable society.

**Keywords:** language and culture, identity, presentations, teaching Chinese as a second language.

## 1. Introduction

In the field of language learning, researchers of language, culture, and identity maintain that students develop ‘a sense of ownership’ of the target language that will ‘enable them to better negotiate their current circumstances and articulate a vision for the future’ (Norton & Gao, 2008; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Due to the impact of COVID-19, many educational exchanges in China have changed from face-to-face interactions to a fully online format, e.g. virtual conferences, online education and training platforms, online discussion communities, etc.

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The purpose of this study is to explore the construction of identity from the sociocultural linguistic perspective. The research is guided by the theories of language socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) and identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 2015). According to language socialization, learners are socialized in a community of practice. In this study, *identity* is defined as “an individual’s multifaceted identities of cultural, ethnic, religious, social class, gender, sexual orientation, professional, family/relational role, and personal image(s) based on self-reflection and other categorization social construction processes” (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 418). This sense of identification can be divided into four levels: individual, social, national, and ecocultural.

Apart from *identity*, two concepts of *culture* and *story* are also defined. Culture is the shared values, beliefs, and practices that can be interpreted in the meanings constructed by the participants in the local, national, and global contexts (Croucher, Sommier, & Rahmani, 2015). In this sense, the analysis of culture and communication from the ecological perspective can be viewed as “an engaged form of critical inquiry” featuring “discourse analysis of a wide range of texts” since “[l]anguage, culture, human cognition, stories and texts play a role in human ecology to the extent that they influence human behaviour, and hence the ways that humans interact with each other and the larger natural world” (Stibbe, 2015, p. 8). According to Stibbe (2015), discourses are the “stories in the minds of multiple individuals across a culture” (p. 6) and involve an element of cultural theme.

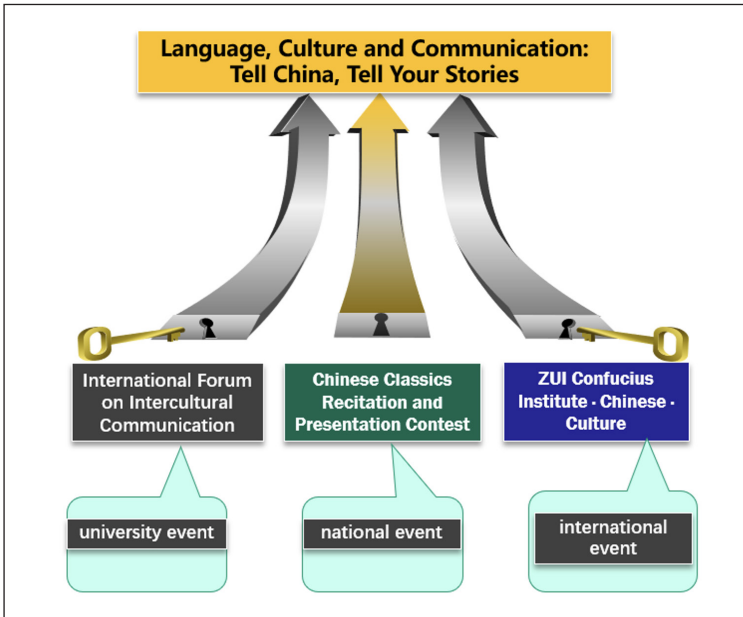
The two research questions are as follows: (1) What are the characteristics of the presentations? (2) How do the international students construct their identities in the presentations?

## 2. Method

This study (June–November of 2020) took place in the International Chinese Training Center at a university in Beijing. ‘Language, Culture and Communication: Tell China, Tell Your Stories’ is a pedagogical project aiming at helping international students improve their Chinese, share and appreciate cultural similarities and differences, and increase cultural awareness through participating in Chinese speech contests at three levels, including a university-wide event (i.e. ‘International Forum on Intercultural Communication’), a national event (i.e. ‘Chinese Classics Recitation and Presentation Contest’), and an international event (i.e. ‘ZUI Confucius Institute, Chinese Culture’, Figure 1).

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Figure 1. ‘Language, culture and communication: tell China, tell your stories’



The participants were 15 international students from ten countries along the Belt and Road. They had passed the Chinese proficiency test HSK-5. They spent four weeks getting prepared for the speech events under the guidance of a team of Chinese instructors.

Data include 26 video presentations submitted to three online events mentioned above, a questionnaire survey, ten semi-structured interviews, a pre-test and a post-test of the participants’ technology use based on the research by [Kim, Kim, Khera, and Getman \(2014\)](#), and reflective teaching notes. All the presentations were transcribed (26,311 Chinese characters) and then analyzed.

The questionnaire was adapted from those of [Brown \(2009\)](#) and [Littlewood \(2001\)](#) and evolved after being piloted with a different student group. It consisted of 30 items in three sections: views of authority (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.727$ ), students’ identities (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.713$ ), and intercultural competence (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.732$ ).

The questionnaire was distributed to the participants in mid-December of 2020 and 15 (100%) replies were collected. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

### 3. Results and discussion

Discussion of the results in this section attempts to answer the two research questions listed above.

#### 3.1. Characteristics of the presentations

Analysis of the presentations shows two characteristics: technological support and beneficial discourses. First, results of the pre-test and the post-test show that all participants had a more robust method for presentation delivery and video making than before the project. The reflective teaching notes gave supporting evidence that the participants had made great progress in such presentation skills as ‘Chinese language communication’, ‘Non-verbal communication’, and ‘Visual aids’. When it comes to ‘Visual aids’, the students used a variety of technological tools to help them present and make presentation videos including virtual reality classrooms and video editing software.

The second feature of the presentations is beneficial discourses identified based on discourse analysis. Discourses can be divided into three categories: destructive, ambivalent, and beneficial. Despite their different cultural backgrounds, all participants shared their stories and their understanding of Chinese culture (Table 1). As can be seen from Table 1, the top three ecological viewpoints are ‘Cultural Differences and Shared Prosperity’, ‘Human and Nature’, and ‘Chinese History and Classics’.

Table 1. Viewpoints in the presentations

Number of presentations	Viewpoints	Percentage
10	Cultural Differences and Shared Prosperity	38.5%
4	Chinese History and Classics	15.4%
2	Digital Humanities	7.7%
6	Human and Nature	23.1%
4	Sustainability and Intangible Culture	15.4%

#### 3.2. Students’ identities

Presented below (Table 2) is the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data related to authority, identity, and intercultural competence.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Views of authority	4.36	0.93
Students' identities	4.02	0.82
Intercultural competence	3.98	0.78

Results indicate that the students' identities were closely related to their views of authority. This was supported by the interview data that the participants approached collaborative learning and seeking guidance from the teachers with positive attitudes. Moreover, the participants regarded the teacher's role as the authority of knowledge transmission. During the four week's training, although they used the virtual reality classrooms and video editing software quite often, most of them relied heavily on the teachers' help and focused on language learning rather than creativity and critical thinking. Furthermore, 13 students mentioned that they had improved their intercultural competence. As Ruisheng said,

“participating in the speech contests has helped me appreciate the beauty of the Chinese poems and make connections with the current situation. ‘No clouds will block the sun and no way can the winter slow down the pace of the spring’. Salute to all those who have joined the fight against the pandemic! ((smile and confident))” (Interview, 2020-12-21).

From an ecological learning standpoint, Ruisheng positioned herself both in the local context of the speech event and in the global context of fighting against COVID-19. The analysis of the students' identities shows the important role of identity in language learning contexts (Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2013).

## 4. Conclusions

In this study, the researcher explored the dynamics of identity in a Chinese teaching context. Results show that the participants have not only improved their skills in technology and presentations but also enhanced their cultural sensitivity. More importantly, they had constructed a variety of identities in the local and global contexts, which was reflected in the students' learning activities, including presentation training activities and the speech contests.

The findings provide supporting evidence for the complicated relations between language learners and their learning communities. As learners of Chinese take greater ownership of the language and redefine the learning communities, online

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and offline, researchers and educators should reconsider the role of economic, sociocultural, and political factors in learners' identity construction and negotiation in natural settings.

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