Using Digital Tools to Address Pedagogical and Linguistic Challenges in a Sino-Foreign Undergraduate Program

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Abstract: *The growth of Sino-foreign cooperative universities, departments and courses in China necessitates further discussion of how to develop teaching approaches that suit students attending these institutions. Despite substantial analysis of the commercial dimensions of Sino-foreign university partnerships, discussion of effective teaching strategies within these settings remains underdeveloped. This paper shares the author's experience of developing and delivering a Western civilization course to 210 students attending a Sino-foreign undergraduate program at a Chinese university over the course of one academic year. Specific attention is paid to how digital tools can be used to address the challenges of unfamiliar teaching styles, limited language comprehension, and the lack of prior exposure to course content. Student feedback and anecdotal observations are drawn upon to underscore the potential utility of certain digital course aids deployed in the classroom and lecture hall, as well as being accessible to students through an online platform.*

Keywords: *Chinese students; Sino-foreign university; digital tools; critical pedagogy; internationalisation*

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education has provoked a range of discussions around its administrative, economic, and pedagogical dimensions (Jones, 2009; Knight, 2011; De Wit, 2020). Since the Chinese State Education Commission actively began to encourage cooperation between Chinese institutions and foreign partners in 1995, the growth of Sino-foreign partnership universities, institutes and courses has been consistent (Lu, 2018; Yang & Wu, 2021). As noted by Che (2023), academic discussion on the educational practices within this internationalised system remains underdeveloped, with attention often focusing on its administrative and managerial aspects.

The present study seeks to address this deficiency through a critical reflection on the delivery of a Western civilization course taught in a Sino-foreign undergraduate program at a Chinese university. Students on the course, majoring in accounting and finance, are eligible to apply to continue their degrees abroad (predominantly in the USA) after completing two years of English-taught study across a general education curriculum (Haixia Xueyuan, n.d.). In order to develop a meaningful pedagogical bridge between traditional Chinese secondary education and Western university teaching, our course was developed using the critical pedagogy of Brazilian philosopher of education Paulo Freire (1921-1997). Course design sought to introduce students to a partnership model of teaching, in contrast to the hierarchical 'narrative' teaching model in which students are passive receivers of information (Freire, 2000, pp. 71-72; Peters & Mathias, 2018). Alongside the goal of facilitating an empowering learning environment, elements of the partnership model were also employed to try and address the well-acknowledged challenges of class participation and understanding for students attending university courses taught in their second language (L2) (Hu, 2019).

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The course required us to consider critically how to select appropriate content and teaching activities for Chinese students with limited prior exposure to the field. Longstanding debates around the teaching of Western civilization note its problematic origins as an academic subject, alongside suggestions for how innovative methods can refocus teaching away from a top-down, 'great men' approach (Allardyce, 1982; Matta, Da Silva, Amorim & Boaventura, 2018). Most discussion of the subject is situated firmly within a Western (predominantly American) context, and this paper considers how the course is received by Chinese students with distinct understandings and expectations.

The decision to employ digital tools to support our course was made with three main priorities in mind; firstly, to make all course materials (including lecture notes, slides, sources for discussion, external databases and assessment information) fully available to students through an online platform; secondly, to facilitate class activities during which students would be asked to open discussion materials on their mobile devices, with the encouragement to work at their own pace and use translation tools if necessary; thirdly, to facilitate teaching that aligned with a Freirean partnership approach, without neglecting the key content required for students to participate and complete assessments to a high standard.

This paper suggests the utilisation of digital tools provides possible solutions to some challenges facing Chinese students in the internationalised university such as unfamiliar communication styles, classroom expectations, and customs of foreign academic staff (Knight, 2014; Kihwele, Taye & Alduais, 2022; Noman, Kaur, Mullick & Ran, 2023). We address the relative lack of research into teaching practices, materials and pedagogies employed within the Sino-foreign university context, focusing on both the distinct circumstances, needs and expectations of Chinese students, alongside subject-specific concerns around content selection and delivery.

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

Internationalisation of Chinese Higher Education

The process of internationalisation in higher education has sparked debates around teaching, learning and research, alongside more nebulous issues concerning societal engagement, economic competitiveness, and even international diplomacy (Chen, 2011; Lu, 2018; Wilkins, 2020; Wen, Wang & Cui, 2022; Bhardwaj & Kumar, 2023). The arrival of modern universities in China was part of the baggage of colonialism, Yang (2014, p. 153) describes them as 'an imported concept' loaded with potential tensions and troubled institutional histories. The development of higher education in China began in the late nineteenth century when Western and Japanese influences initiated the first stages of a modern university system (universities opened in Tianjin (1895), Beijing (1898), Nanjing (1902) and Hunan (1903). After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Soviet influence dominated university policy until the 'reform and opening up' of the country by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, when a conscious effort was resumed to internationalise the higher education system in the hope of supporting Chinese aspirations to modernity and globalism (Huang, 2003; Chen, 2011). The policy between 1978 and 1992 focused on supporting Chinese students going abroad and attracting foreign academics across a range of fields, notably English-language education, to make up for the preceding period of isolation (Huang, 2003; Yang, 2014). In 1995, the State Education Commission announced a policy of actively encouraging cooperation between Chinese institutions and foreign partners, and by 1999 the number of such projects had passed seventy (Huang, 2003).

Sino-foreign partnerships and collaborations in various forms have continued to grow in recent years, with many foreign universities seeking to take advantage of the huge pool of students ambitious to associate with a prestigious foreign institution. The system can be divided into three general categories; university-level partnerships (between a Chinese and foreign university, of which nine had been established by 2018, see Appendix A); institute level (an international 'branch campus' (IBC) within an existing Chinese university; and finally at degree level, where courses taught in China are supported and recognised by a partner institution abroad (Lu, 2018; Yang & Wu, 2021).

International universities themselves are a diverse category, with varying degrees of cooperation and involvement from the partner institutions, funding arrangements, and staff and student bodies (Knight, 2015). The Ministry of Education office responsible for 'Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools' uses two categories. Firstly, cooperative 'institutions' (currently totalling 186), includes both full university-level partnerships and subject-focused departments within Chinese universities. The second category of 'cooperative school projects' (currently numbering 1207) includes degree courses completed in China and accredited or recognised by a foreign partner institution (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Due to their use of English as the medium of instruction (EMI), international partnerships align with key policy goals of the Ministry of Education to encourage English proficiency (Hu, 2019). Nonetheless, Hu (2019) discovered that across several (nominally) EMI courses at Chinese universities there remained significant use of Chinese by local staff, reduced participation and cognitive complexity during tasks when working in English. Research within international branch campuses (IBCs) at Chinese universities has revealed further challenges; faculty members' country of origin exerted a substantial influence over teaching practice and communication style, which could strike Chinese students as 'confusing and intimidating'(Noman, Kaur, Mullick & Ran, 2023, p. 6).

Students attending courses in their non-native language face a range of challenges (Li, Wang, Liu, Xu & Cui, 2018; Lin, Wen, Ching & Huang, 2021; Zhao & B'beri, 2022). As Cheng and Fox (2008, p. 316) found in their analysis of L2 students studying at Canadian universities, issues included 'significantly higher levels of anxiety and shyness when asking for help' from teaching staff, and misunderstandings around cultural expectations and roles in the university environment. Chinese students studying overseas face similar challenges; Zhang-Wu (2018) noted the key differences in educational traditions between the USA, where teaching and learning is closely related to discussion and collaboration, and China, where language learning is often focused on literacy and can leave students under-prepared for university teaching.

Recently, teachers working within international universities have begun to share their experiences of introducing different pedagogies to students from cultures in which these methods are less established (Kaur, 2020). Che (2023), an Assistant Professor of International Studies at Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University, invited students to create short podcasts related to seminar topics, which positively influenced discussion and engagement during seminars. This strategy mitigated students' potential anxieties about speaking proficiency (podcasts could be prepared in private prior to class), and engagement with class texts.

Pedagogical Approach

In order to place discussion and collaboration at the core of our teaching practice we chose to develop our course with reference to the critical pedagogy of Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire (1921-1997). Freire (2000, pp. 71-72) described several systems he felt obstructed effective learning, including an over-reliance on 'narrative' teaching and the 'banking' concept of education (in which students receive, file, and store deposited information). The remedy for this hierarchical pedagogy is to invite students to become 'partners' within a learning environment of mutual exchange, trust, and collaboration (Freire, 2000, p. 75; 2005). With specific reference to the teaching of history, Freire (2005) advocated presenting material to students in a way that invites critical analysis and personal reflection. Critical pedagogy continues to inform university teaching internationally, especially a focus on students as partners, in spite of prevailing neoliberal trends within higher education (Peters & Mathias, 2018).

Freirean concepts of partnership and student empowerment contrast with the traditional Western civilization course, associated with the American university curriculum during the early twentieth century and frequently denigrated as part of a political project to promote Western cultural superiority (Allardyce, 1982; Peters, 2021). In its earliest iterations, the course reflected beliefs within the conservative academy that had 'long universalized European history into the general history of

mankind' (Allardyce, 1982, p. 706). The key content of the course, which peaked in popularity between the 1920s and 1950s, was summarised by Bavaj (2011, p. 1) as taking students 'on an intellectual journey that began in ancient Greece and culminated in present-day America, meandering quite literally from Plato to NATO.' The fortunes of the course began to fail during the 1960s, in lockstep with the tribulations of American foreign policy and changing academic trends (Grafton, 2006; Brint, Proctor, Murphy, Turk-Bicacki & Hanneman, 2009; Marino, 2010; Conrad, 2019; Naumann, 2019). The rise of the social history movement, history 'from below', and the trauma of the Vietnam War all accelerated a transition away from what Allardyce (1982, p. 725) described as a 'wilted course'.

In the twenty-first century, concerns have arisen over the utility and relevance of such survey-style courses taken by students majoring in a different field. Sipress and Voelker (2011, pp. 1062; 1066) identified a 'concern for issues of cultural literacy and citizenship education' driving content selection and teaching methods, repurposing debates from the Western civilization course to foster 'argumentative discussion'. The growing sophistication and access to digital technology, including the emergence of virtual museums, libraries and open-source repositories of historical data has further democratised the field (Matta, Da Silva, Amorim & Boaventura, 2018). Nonetheless, developing a modern, partnership approach to teaching Western civilization remains a daunting task; Caferro (2018) outlined his initial reservations about teaching the course, and subsequent decision to bring the discussion of methodology to the forefront, challenging Eurocentrism and focusing on a deep- reading of primary sources. In our course design we sought to acknowledge and problematise certain elements of this historiography and focus on how students can engage with the course content through debate and discussion (Spaska, Savishchenko, Komar & Maidanyk, 2021; deNoyelles & Kovacevich, 2022).

Course Design

Course Setting and Institutional Background

This paper discusses the Western civilization course taught to students at the Straits College (海峡学院 – Haixia Xueyuan, or 'Haixia') of Minjiang University (闽江学院), located in Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian province on China's South East Coast. The course was delivered as part of the Sino-US Program, which operates a '2+2' model: students complete two years of study in finance or accounting alongside a general education curriculum and English language training in Fuzhou, they may then apply to continue their studies at a foreign university (some students complete four years of study in China and apply for postgraduate study abroad after graduation). Since its establishment in 2009, Haixia's Sino-US program has admitted over 1600 students, with over 300 continuing their studies internationally at institutions including Temple University in Philadelphia, Portland State University, Cardiff and York Universities in the United Kingdom (Haixia Xueyuan, n.d.).

Minjiang University is a mid-ranking public university (formed in 2002 with the merger of Fuzhou Normal College and Minjiang Vocational University), with approximately 16,000 students and 1000 staff. Notably, Chinese Premier Xi Jinping served as president of the university from 1990-1996 (concurrent with his other official roles in Fujian province) and has continued to offer support, visiting personally in 2021 to mark its sixtieth anniversary (Edurank, n.d; Minjiang University, n.d). Teaching responsibilities at Haixia for both subject teaching across the general education curriculum and English courses are divided between Chinese and foreign staff (with some of the latter also delivering courses at the neighbouring Fuzhou Melbourne Polytechnic, an international branch campus of Melbourne Polytechnic hosted at Minjiang University) (Fuzhou Melbourne Polytechnic, n.d). Facilities and resources available to students are typical of public universities in China, including a large library, good access to English-language materials, digital projectors and high-speed wireless internet (many students choose to make notes and follow teaching content using digital devices in class).

Western Civilization is one of the required courses for accounting and finance students in the Haixia Sino-US program. Teaching and assessment are delivered in English, and the main teaching materials include an English-language textbook and a short module guide. Teaching across the department is not connected to a virtual learning environment, assignments are submitted directly to teachers (plagiarism checks, anonymity and other measures are implemented at the discretion of the course convenor), and communication is hosted on the Chinese messaging and social media app QQ. The course discussed in this paper was delivered during the academic year 2022/23 to 210 students in three classes; 142 students (separated into two classes of around 70 students) during the autumn semester, and a class of 68 students during the spring semester. Each class received three ninety-minute lectures per fortnight, alongside one ninety-minute seminar-style class delivered by a local Chinese teacher.

Developing an Online Platform to Support Students

During planning for the 2022/23 semester, in particular the preparation of lecture materials and sources, we made the decision to provide students full access to *all* materials used in the preparation of lectures and class activities. Specifically, it was decided to make these materials available through an online platform, accessible through either a web link or a QR code. This decision was informed partly by the fact that many Chinese students have translation tools built into their web browsers, and it is far more convenient to translate new or unfamiliar vocabulary when accessed digitally rather than through printed materials. Furthermore, encouraging students to use their own devices to access source materials during class was intended to address the limitations on participation imposed by the traditional lecture setting, and allow students to examine multimedia sources in detail and at their own pace.

The platform chosen for hosting the course website was Notion, which offers a range of functionalities and is often used for personal or collaborative organisation, scheduling, project planning and management. For the needs of the course (primarily uploading text and images to an easily navigable platform), the free-to-use tier of the platform was sufficient, however, purchasing additional storage space for video recordings and other large file-size materials is available through a paid subscription. During the second semester of the 2022/23 academic year, Notion embedded a translation function using GPT-3, and this was used to provide AI-generated Chinese translations of some source texts and introductions (approved by the local teacher).

The layout of the website was designed to be as straightforward as possible; a landing page containing a navigable table linking through to various content, tagged and colour-coded by item type (lecture, sourcebook, external database etc.). The landing page also contained links to information about key dates for the course, assignment deadlines and specifications, a referencing guide and contact information for the instructors (see Appendix B). This layout was intended to be as user-friendly as possible, and to work effectively when viewed either on desktop or mobile devices, individual site pages could also be easily shared through a browser-generated QR code. Class communication was hosted through the Chinese messaging platform QQ, with QQ groups created for each cohort, and links to sources, lecture notes and other materials shared directly with students the day before each class to encourage them to preview. Information related to formatting, presentation and example papers were shared directly with students via site links around assignment deadlines, and this information could be edited or in response to student questions.

The primary rationale behind the decision to make all course materials available through an online platform was to indicate to students that the course would be a collaborative and open partnership (notes and knowledge from the teacher were not hidden in an inaccessible 'black box'). Students could (and did) request additional resources such as maps and timelines be added to the site, and an 'image of the week' related to class content was updated regularly to try and keep students interested and engaged. Students were also able to follow along in real-time with lectures, using their own devices to translate or revisit unfamiliar L2 language. This was intended to offset

students' issues with understanding spoken English, a consequence of the frequently literacy-focused objectives of language learning in Chinese schools (Davitishvili, 2007; Zhang-Wu, 2018).

Class Design

Lectures were designed with concerns about accessibility, L2 support, and partnership teaching in mind, and delivered in a uniform structure. Firstly, the lecture title was introduced, and students were shown a QR code that would take them to the relevant webpage for the source discussion materials for the session (see Appendix B); secondly, students were introduced to three key questions around which the lecture would be structured; finally, five to eight key terms were introduced and explained (and translated if necessary). The lecture was then delivered in three thirty-minute sections (with a short break at halfway), each section containing fifteen to twenty minutes of teacher-led lecturing, followed by a ten-minute source discussion. During the time allotted for source discussions, students were encouraged to access source materials on their own devices through scanning the QR code.

This structure aimed to encourage students to develop familiarity with the website, which was also used to share information about assessment deadlines, course activities and links to external databases and information sources. It was hoped that using the website in class together would give students confidence to visit it independently for their own needs. The pattern of introducing lectures with three questions and a list of key terms was designed in anticipation of challenging L2 content, and in order to clearly preview how the ninety-minute teaching period would be broken down into more manageable sections. Finally, uploading full lecture notes and slides meant students were free to focus on following the lecture, and if necessary use the materials to scaffold their comprehension, rather than try to simultaneously listen in L2, make notes, and prepare to participate in class discussion.

A Source-Focused Course

Source analysis is an effective way of deconstructing the historical method and encouraging students to consider how scholarly agency influences and informs historiography (Caferro, 2018). Each lecture period was designed around three separate source discussions, during which students were asked to discuss a range of materials in pairs or small groups. The central role allocated to source discussion was intended to counterbalance the perceived necessity of presenting some information in a traditional teacher-led lecturing style as a consequence of students' limited prior subject knowledge. Selection of materials was intended to expose students to 'traditional' sources for Western Civilization, such as portraits of monarchs and modern photographs of notable buildings and cities, alongside clips from film adaptations, extracts from journals and diaries. Source analysis and discussion was used to try and foster an atmosphere of Freirean partnership in class, in which students had plenty of opportunities to direct discussion and share their personal views and responses.

Assessment design for the course also reflected the central importance of source discussion and student choice; the first written assignment was a source analysis task (worth 20 per cent of the overall grade), in which students were asked to choose from any source discussed during lectures that resonated with them. Many students chose portraits of English monarchs Elizabeth I and Henry VIII, others chose artworks such as Spiridione Roma's *The East Offering its Riches to Britannia* (1778, commissioned by the East India Company), a diagram showing conditions aboard slave ships presented by British abolitionists, and illustrations from Vesalius' *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543). The final essay assignment (worth 40 per cent of the overall grade) was also designed around student choice; they could write about the significance of a historical figure, political or religious movement, the changing role of women, or impact of science and technology. These assessments were chosen to enable students to engage with the histories that most interested them. As per department requirements, students were also required to complete two short quizzes, which were

conducted open book and focused on matching key terms to their definitions. Attendance and class participation were also monitored.

Findings

Quantitative Feedback

In order to gather quantitative data on satisfaction with the course, students were asked to complete a short module evaluation questionnaire after the final lecture, containing eight questions with an agree/disagree range of 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (agree completely) (see Appendix C, student feedback). In semester 2, an additional four closed questions were added seeking specific feedback on how students had used the online platform. At the end of the questionnaire, students were invited to give any general comments or criticisms on the course. The total number of respondents at the end of semester 1 was 114 (out of a total cohort size of 142, 80 per cent), in semester 2 the total number of respondents was 66 (out of a total cohort size of 68, 97 per cent). For ease of understanding questions were provided in both English and Chinese, and some students also provided feedback in Chinese.

As the student feedback indicates, students reported high levels of satisfaction across the course, especially regarding approachability and supportiveness from the two instructors (question 7). Semester 1 and 2 cohorts both reported lower levels of satisfaction related to their understanding of assignments and quizzes (question 5), indicative of a need to spend more time and commit more resources to clarifying student assignment requirements and expectations. The additional questions (9-12) were added to the MEQ for the second-semester cohort to try and better understand how students were using the website. Reassuringly, 98 per cent of students stated they had used the website to review lecture content (question 9), with similarly high levels for students using the platform to check deadlines and assignment information (question 10: 95 per cent) and as a gateway to external databases and information sources (question 11: 94 per cent). Finally, 71 per cent of students reported using the website for another unspecified reason, informal conversations with students indicated that such reasons might be to learn more about images and other multimedia discussed during class, or to show friends and classmates. At the end of the academic year, the website had been accessed 5,727 times.

Qualitative Feedback

Alongside quantitative feedback, at the end of each semester, students were given the opportunity to anonymously share their comments and criticisms about the course. The majority of students either chose not to comment or used the form as an opportunity to thank the instructors. More targeted comments, highlighting a specific criticism or area of success, were received and coded into three general categories; teaching-related issues; language-related issues; and targeted positive feedback.

Teaching-related issues included calls for more interaction between instructors and staff, and more extensive use of discussion activities. After semester 1, one student suggested that classes could incorporate different teaching methods, "…such as a group debate on an issue in class. It makes people more interested in history." Another student felt the amount of time dedicated to open discussion was insufficient, requesting that instructors "assign some thought questions after class for oral answers, which can connect current social issues with historical events. It's an open question. Everyone can say whatever they want. We don't have to worry about whether what everyone says is right or wrong, simple or complicated, we just have to express our own ideas." A different student was concerned that as the Western civilization course is not directly related to the major (finance or accounting), "students actually pay little attention to this course", they went on to suggest that "the course content is too much, [and] the knowledge points are explained quickly." Another student commented, "I think the class maybe can be more interesting. Give more special

stories to people and events in history." This feedback reveals concerns among some students around the volume of course content, and a desire for more opportunities to engage with it on their own terms through more frequent discussion.

The second main area of critical feedback was related to language issues. For a predominantly lecture-based course (albeit with regularly scheduled source analysis discussions), it is perhaps unsurprising that some students felt intimidated by the presentation of a substantial amount of information unrelated to their major. One student commented "I hope we can occasionally use some simple words during class," while another stated, "I have some difficulty understanding the foreign teacher in class, as my English proficiency may not be sufficient." Another student was concerned that they "did not understand this event or words very fast, I should [like] some more details about that, maybe because I am not very good at the Western civilization, but I would like to know more!" Raising a subject-specific concern, one student reflected that "maybe because it is the history of Western civilization, many names in it contain German or French". Clearly, some students felt that either their own language level was insufficient to maximise their engagement with the course, or that teaching language during lectures was insufficiently graded.

Finally, some students provided targeted positive feedback after each semester. After semester 1, students appreciated that "[the instructors] always prepare all things we will use, I'm so thankful,' described the course content as interesting, and praised the "way of teaching" employed on the course. After semester 2, one student wrote "your website is so good, I always use it to finish my essay," while another commented, "teachers are very good and approachable, and the difficulty of the courses is also very suitable for our current English level. I really like both teacher[s], because of this class, I am interested in the history of Western civilizations."

Reflections and Discussion

This course was designed and delivered by a newly-appointed foreign lecturer with a teaching and research background in the British university system, with the support of an experienced local teacher responsible for course administration, student support, and leading seminars. The instructor profiles are significant, as the opportunities and challenges of international staff in the internationalised university setting can be an important influencing factor on expectations and learning culture (Knight, 2014; Kihwele, Taye & Alduais, 2022). In our case, we feel that collaboration between English and Chinese instructors helped to develop a course that was more informed around students' backgrounds and linguistic needs. The main discussion areas arising from our experience with this course relate to students' linguistic proficiency, utilisation of the materials made available through the online platform and addressing differences in educational culture that affected students' approach to learning.

Students' Linguistic Proficiency

Management of students' confidence in working in L2 was central to the successful delivery of the course. As anticipated, qualitative feedback from students indicated some class members felt the spoken delivery of lecture content was above their English level. We hope that access to written lecture notes, slides, databases, and assignment briefs through the online platform enabled students to revisit (and translate if necessary) course materials. Decisions about teaching style and content included strategies to mitigate intercultural misunderstanding through the using content summaries, previewing key vocabulary, and using students' native language for some materials (Davitishvili, 2007).

We aimed to be conscious of our potential biases as instructors around students' English proficiency and avoid mistaking linguistic ability for progress in the course (Ryan & Viete, 2009). In the lecture setting, Ryan and Viete outline how prior English study may not equip students for 'discipline-specific and often fast-paced' delivery, or to recognise codes and prompts in assignment outlines and questions (Ryan & Viete, 2009, p. 306). With this in mind, we gave students the option

to access materials in L2 and used bilingual teaching and assessment guidelines (supported by the native co-teacher) to try to limit potential misunderstandings (Lin, 2019). Feedback indicated that some students still felt overwhelmed by the content and pace of lectures, and further work in this area is necessary if the goal of supporting students across all linguistic ability levels within a diverse cohort is to be realised.

Use of the Online Platform

A central part of the course design was to develop an empowering and collaborative learning environment through open access to materials via an online platform. In 2015, the Chinese government announced the national 'Internet +' policy of integrating internet functions with traditional industries (including education), drawing upon growing online infrastructure and the ubiquity of smartphones and smart devices (Meng, Li, Chu, Wu & Wan, 2023). Analysis of large, department and institution-wide online platforms offered by external providers such as Moodle and Open edX indicated a range of advantages, including increased access, course content management, and flexibility to suit students' specific needs (Liu, Lomovtseva & Korobeynikova, 2020). Experiences of online teaching in both secondary and higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated substantial receptibility and high levels of perceived usefulness towards digital learning (Jiang, Islam, Gu, Spector & Chen, 2022).

The main advantage of these tools is empowering students to choose how, when, and where to engage with learning materials. Developing a platform with the support of an enthusiastic local teacher was a stimulating and rewarding experience that resonates with the trend among some instructors to be active in this innovative area of teaching practice (Zhu, 2020; Sathish & Nethravathi, 2022). With particular reference to the international student context, digital tools have been found to be a popular way of introducing Chinese students to foreign teaching styles and expectations, undermining potential barriers to engagement and confidence (Zhang, Robb, Eyerman & Goodman, 2017). High levels of engagement with our platform, based on total site visits and positive qualitative feedback, indicate such platforms can be an effective source of support for students.

Navigating Intercultural Expectations

Internationalised higher education is an important setting for exploring the interaction between educational systems. As Sawir notes, acknowledging the risk of essentialising national education cultures, some East Asian and Southeast Asian nations appear to nurture a more 'passive-receptive' learning style than Western counterparts (Sawir, 2005, p. 570). Multilingual classrooms in Sino-foreign universities pose a range of pedagogical challenges, including 'success anxieties' among students who fear incorrectly answering questions during discussion, with educational background exerting a potentially greater effect on learning behaviour than L2 proficiency (Ergenc, 2020, p. 2).

Levels of class participation varied dramatically across our cohort of 210 students. Some were enthusiastic and frequent participants in class discussions, while others remained silent and appeared disengaged during these activities. Key factors influencing participation appeared to be language ability and confidence, lack of interest in lecture content, and a general unfamiliarity with discussion-focused teaching. We feel that our class design gave students opportunities to participate in a partnership-focused learning model but accepting the different personalities and attitudes among the group inevitably led to a range of responses to teaching style.

Cross-cultural factors affecting teaching and administrative staff across a range of roles influence the 'cultural meeting place of the classroom', and it is important to acknowledge the impact of international staff on teaching and assessment in the Sino-foreign setting (Coleman, 2003, p. 366). Especially for students on courses taught by foreign staff in their home country who may only be immersed in the foreign culture and language during the teaching period, it can be difficult to quickly transition between cultural and linguistic modes (Healey, 2016). Our experience delivering a

Western civilization course presented further challenges, as students' prior exposure to the material was generally limited. Some students felt that the volume of course content was too high, and that material was not explained clearly enough. This feedback highlights the importance of striking a balance between fulfilling the coverage requirements of a survey-style course with the pedagogical goal of encouraging students to become partners in their learning.

Implications and Limitations of the Study

Supporting Critical Pedagogy in Internationalised courses

The tools outlined in this study were developed to address challenges, both pedagogical and linguistic, in the fast-growing internationalised higher education setting in China. This course was developed using Freirean principles of critical pedagogy, specifically, an attempt to avoid narrative teaching through scheduled discussions during lectures, increased student agency in selecting coursework topics, and student empowerment through open access to course materials (Freire, 2000; 2005). As recent contributors to the discourse of students-as-partners have outlined, learning in partnership aims to influence students' approach beyond the classroom or lecture theatre, and can be 'enduring and unconfined' (Peters & Mathias, 2018, p. 64). Our aim with the course was to nurture a critical mindset that would benefit students throughout their undergraduate journey.

We hope that this example of implementing partnership teaching in the Sino-foreign university setting will encourage course designers and instructors to continue to experiment with critical pedagogy (Che, 2023). Despite the acknowledged challenges of introducing new roles for instructors and students, greater democratisation of the learning environment evidently has the potential to create rewarding experiences and successful outcomes for students (Kaur, 2020). A range of digital tools to overcome barriers to partnership teaching arising from linguistic challenges in the Sino-foreign university can be used to enhance the potential of students as active partners in their education.

A Considered Approach to Linguistic Challenges

As outlined by Hu (2019, p. 8) empirical research into the linguistic challenges of teacher-student interactions in Chinese educational settings is necessary to avoid perpetuating the 'yawning gap between optimistically envisioned policy goals and the reality on the ground.' Our provision of teaching materials in written form in L2 was implemented to address Chinese students' frequent imbalance between reading proficiency and experience with native speech (Zhang-Wu, 2018). Addressing linguistic challenges is an important first step in establishing a more student-centred environment in class, which is often at odds with students' secondary education experience of structured, teacher-centred learning (Noman, Kaur, Mullick & Ran, 2023).

Student feedback and anecdotal reflection on the course indicated an advantage in providing access to course materials in written form and clearly explaining expectations for class participation. Making materials digitally available maximises students' access to quick and easy translation tools on their devices, encouraging engagement in class discussion and debate. This strategy addresses the reality that, despite often taking place within 'international' or 'English-language' departments, students often work bilingually during independent study and when preparing assignments that will ultimately be submitted in English (Hu, 2019). The frequently-asked question of 'how much' Chinese is used on international courses (especially when co-taught by a local instructor) is also confronted, as students gain a clear understanding of when and where L2 participation is expected.

We developed our platform with the advice and support from local Chinese teachers, and strongly believe that such tools benefit immensely from critical workshopping by colleagues. As with many international departments, Haixia Xueyuan benefits from the employment of both local Chinese staff and foreign instructors with a range of national and professional backgrounds. The introduction of systematic processes such as monthly or per-semester teaching practice meetings

can improve the dissemination of ideas and give Chinese staff the opportunity to raise issues related to different educational traditions and perspectives (Noman, Kaur, Mullick & Ran, 2023).

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations to this study that could be addressed in future research to develop a more nuanced understanding of teaching methods in Sino-foreign undergraduate courses. The cohort size of 210 students was limited by enrolment numbers on the program, and a larger and more diverse student group (including, for example, different majors and years of study) would provide opportunities for gathering a more robust dataset. The cohort in this study was relatively homogenous: all students had the same major and a comparable academic record (sufficient to secure admission to the program). Value could be added if the use of similar digital tools was trialled with students from different majors and across a range of English ability levels.

The digital platform was newly created for the 2022/23 academic year and evolved in response to student requests for additional materials and to address issues encountered by the instructors. The replicability of this study is therefore limited to a certain extent by the iterative development and inherent flexibility of the platform itself: we aimed to improve and refine it on a regular basis and anticipate using student input to shape the platform in future. Instructors will inevitably gear digital tools to their specific needs, and analysis of bespoke versions of the platform will also require critical analysis.

Finally, this study would benefit from the experiences of different instructors using similar digital platforms in their own courses across different academic majors and diverse teaching styles. This study indicates that some students benefit from these tools in a lecture and discussions-based Western civilization course, however, our understanding of their potential could be greatly enhanced through implementation and analysis in other academic fields. Further insights could be reached by trialling similar methods with colleagues across different departments and institutions.

Conclusion and Future Research

This paper has shared a course design that addresses key teaching issues in Sino-foreign university education. We used digital tools to facilitate a partnership model of teaching, provide linguistic support, and deliver a meaningful Western civilization course to students lacking prior subject experience. Notable successes of the course include the development of a bespoke online platform which invited students to access and utilise course materials at their own discretion. Inviting students to scan QR codes to access materials on their own devices during teaching periods was a popular function that drove engagement and participation. A source-focused approach to Western civilization resonated well with some students, especially those with higher English language ability most capable of leading class discussions. While some students reported a lack of confidence around participation, the centring of lectures around source discussions nonetheless helped introduce important methodological debates within the field. These activities will hopefully provide a useful reference point for students continuing their studies in foreign universities, where seminar and discussion classes are more common.

Despite making progress in some areas, we encountered a range of challenges in the delivery of this course that reflect both course-specific and general obstacles to student performance in the Sino-foreign university. Student feedback and our anecdotal experience revealed the issue of varied L2 ability continued to be a significant barrier to student participation. A number of reasons could underpin this issue, such as the predominantly literacy-focused language education of the Chinese school system, limited prior exposure to native English speakers, and unfamiliarity with a new academic field. Despite our use of digital tools to provide additional written resources alongside oral discussion, some students felt unable to fully maximise their learning experience as a result of comprehension difficulties. This issue was connected to the second challenge of limited participation

in class discussion, when some students' unwillingness to engage in spoken activities was linked to a lack of confidence in English.

The Sino-foreign university provides a rich environment for the development of new teaching practice strategies, necessitated by the need for a pedagogy that is sensitive to linguistic challenges and students' grounding in a different learning culture. Many existing platforms support comments, questions, and discussion boards, which if used effectively could encourage a greater sense of student participation and ownership of their learning. Course design in the Sino-foreign university must remain sensitive to the particular needs and expectations of students and aspire to a collaborative and critical approach to methods, content, and delivery.

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Appendix A: Chinese Sino-Foreign Cooperative Universities

Sino-Foreign University	Established	Location	Foreign University	Chinese University
University of Nottingham Ningbo China	2004	Ningbo, Zhejiang Province	University of Nottingham (UK)	Zhejiang Wanli University
Beijing Normal University - Hong Kong Baptist University United International College	2005	Zhuhai, Guangdong Province	Hong Kong Baptist University (Hong Kong)	Beijing Normal University
Xi'an Jiaotong - Liverpool University	2006	Suzhou, Jiangsu Province	University of Liverpool (UK)	Xi'an Jiaotong University
New York University Shanghai	2011	Shanghai	New York University (USA)	East China Normal University
Wenzhou-Kean University	2011	Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province	Kean University (USA)	Wenzhou University
Duke Kunshan University	2013	Kunshan, Jiangsu Province	Duke University (USA)	Wuhan University
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen	2014	Shenzhen, Guangdong Province	Chinese University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong)	Shenzhen University
Guangdong Technion - Israel Institute of Technology	2016	Shantou, Guangdong Province	Technion Israel Institute of Technology (Israel)	Shantou University
Shenzhen MSU - BIT University	2017	Shenzhen, Guangdong Province	M.V. Lomosomov Moscow State University (Russia)	Beijing Institute of Technology

Source: Lu (2018)

Appendix B: Images Showing Online Platform

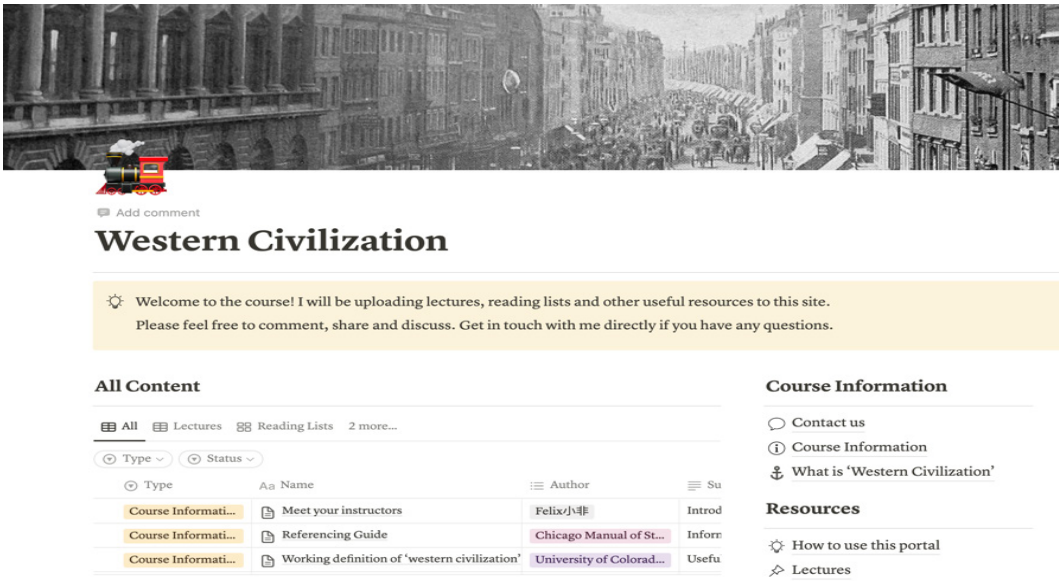

Figure 1: Online Platform Landing Page (desktop view)

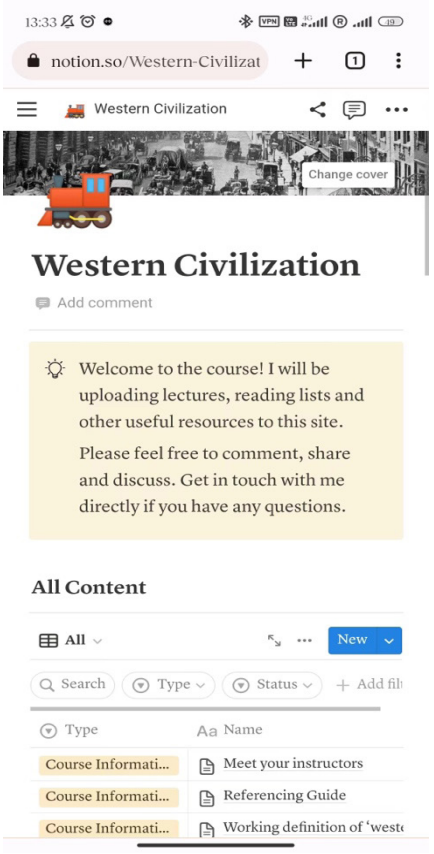

Figure 2: Online Platform Landing Page (mobile view)

Figure 3: Source for Discussion with English and AI-translated Summary (mobile view)

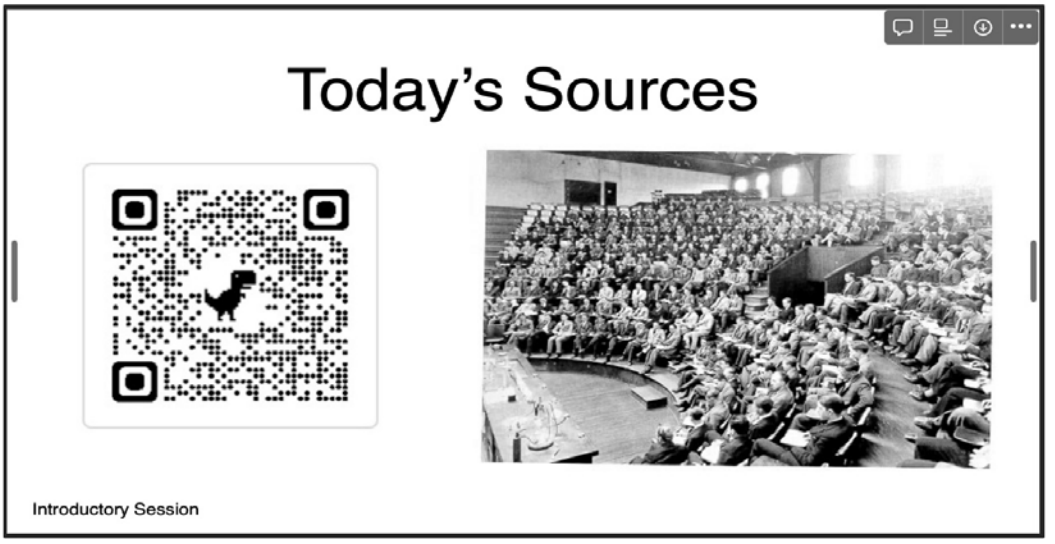

Figure 4: Example Lecture Slide with QR code Linked to Website Sourcebook

Appendix C: Student Feedback

Question	Average Score Semester 1/2
1. I enjoyed taking this course.我喜欢这门课	9.31/ 9.35
2. The course content was interesting. 上课内容很有趣	9.42/ 9.5
3. The pace of teaching was appropriate. 上课节奏合理。	9.52/ 9.65
4. I had access to all resources I needed. 我能获取到所有需要的资源。	9.46/ 9.42
5. I understood the assignments and quizzes. 我理解作业和小测	9.13/ 9.18
6.I received helpful feedback. 我从老师那得到有用的反馈。	9.60/ 9.67
7. The instructors were approachable and supportive. 老师平易近人，并乐于帮助。	9.84/ 9.83
8. The online materials were useful and accessible. 网络资源有用，并能获取	9.56/ 9/70
9. I used the website to review content around lectures 我用 [lecturer] 设计的网站复习讲课内容	N/A/ 98
10. I used the website to check information about deadlines and assessment 我用网站查看作业截止日期和课程评价。	N/A/ 95
11. I used the website to check external databases and sources of information 我用网站查看外部数据库和信息来源	N/A/ 94
12. I used the website for another reason 我出于其它原因使用过这个网站。	N/A/ 71