



# Practical Internet Usage for Cultural Appropriation Development

Ku-Yun Chen<sup>(✉)</sup>

Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai 519000, Guangdong, China  
kuyun1115@gmail.com

**Abstract.** This study provided three strategies for teachers to help students build up a sense of cultural appropriation: pictures, YouTube video clips, and group discussions. Each strategy aroused students' different degree of cultural stimulation. With an in-class experimental teaching method and action research in Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai (BITZH) in Guangdong Province, China, the study has found effective teaching methods for creating a vivid classroom atmosphere, building bidirectional student-centered conversations, and developing students' cultural appropriation. The result from this study revealed the advantages of combining and interweaving internet usage while teaching students cultural appropriation.

**Keywords:** Cultural appropriation · Cultural empathy · Teaching methods

## 1 This Is My Culture, Not Yours!

In 2018, Keziah Daum, a 18-year-old white girl, wearing a red Chinese dress (qipao) to a prom night caused a huge debate on cultural appropriation and the pictures of her have been retweeted over 40,000 times (See the picture below). Suddenly, social media and online news went crazy for this incident. For example, South China Morning Post commented “This (news) is just another form of xenophobia<sup>1</sup>.” According to Tam (2018), she believed that Daum probably never exposed herself in Chinese culture, so this was why she made this unintentional ignorance. Things usually come in pairs. Tam shared two examples of celebrities who encountered cultural appropriation. The first example was Jeremy Lin (Taiwanese American basketball player) converted his hair style into African-American style. The second example was Andy Warhol (Pope of pop art) painted Mao Zedong with pop art style. She stated: “Critics of cultural appropriation insist they are not opposed to cultural engagement, but merely wish to prevent inappropriate or disrespectful interpretation of a particular culture, or even messy interactions between cultures (see Footnote 1)”. In spite of whether it is this girl's personal dressing choice, some people have lost their rationale and have called her a

---

<sup>1</sup> Tam, L. (2018, May 15). Those howling loudest about cultural appropriation over Utah schoolgirl wearing qipao do not own the culture they claim to be defending. This is just another form of xenophobia. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from: <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/2146029/those-howling-loudest-about-cultural-appropriation-do-not-own-culture>.

racist. After numerous debates, the researcher has wondered what the fine line between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation is.

The picture is from <http://omgnewsy.com/keziah-daum-wins-support-after-chinese-dress-at-prom-backlash/>.

### 1.1 Definition of Cultural Appropriation

According to Cambridge Dictionary online, it defines cultural appropriation as “the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture<sup>2</sup>”. In other words, the idea of borrowing someone’s cultural traits without cultural awareness can cause a fight in our daily life. To a great extent, cultural appropriation is closely related to racism. Andrews (2018) commented that “with appropriation being such a huge conversation these days, it’s easier than ever to educate yourself about cultural symbols. If you still choose to regard one as a disposable trend, it’s because you simply don’t respect the people behind it<sup>3</sup>”. She argued that “when you can’t see the humanity in people who are different from you, you find no fault in treating their sacred cultural symbols as something to be worn and discarded (see Footnote 3)”. Rogers (2006) explained further that the word appropriation is “from the Latin *appropriare*, meaning ‘to make one’s own,’ from the Latin root *proprius* meaning own, also the root of property”. Under this implication, someone taking other’s “culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another cultural” and make them as his or her own will be viewed as a cultural “theft” (pp. 474–475)<sup>4</sup>.

### 1.2 Significance of Cultural Appropriation

Equipping students with cultural appropriation can reduce their culture shocks, help them respect different religions and politics, be open-minded foods, be aware of taboos and gestures, and use appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication in the different international scenarios. Young (2005) provided an offensive example of American Nazi Party parading via Skokie, Illinois, mainly a Jewish neighborhood in 1977. “Many Jews would find such a parade insulting, abusive, and derogatory.” (p. 135)<sup>5</sup>. A similar incident occur in Taiwan in 2006. A home-room teacher from Kuang-Fu high school in HsinChu City had his students dress up like Nazi Party and expected the crowd to hail Adolf Hitler. The officials at the Israel Embassy and the German Embassy in Taiwan both condemned this ignorant behavior.

<sup>2</sup> Cultural Appropriation. (n.d.). In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieve from: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/zht/詞典/英語/cultural-appropriation>.

<sup>3</sup> Andrews, J. (2018, April 13). How to avoid cultural appropriation at Coachella. *Teen Vogue*. Retrieved from: <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/coachella-cultural-appropriation>.

<sup>4</sup> Rogers, R. A. (2006). From cultural exchange to transculturation: A review and reconceptualization of cultural appropriation. *Communication Theory*, 16(4), 474–503. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00277.x>.

<sup>5</sup> Young, J. O. (2005). Profound offense and cultural appropriation. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63(2), 135–146. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-8529.2005.00190.x>.

Ipsa facto, many colleges expect students to take cross-cultural communication courses because these cultural cultivating classes can benefit students' both common senses and future career. First, cross-cultural Communication is a required course for most English-major students in China. Students without being aware of cultural empathy can be ignorant, bad-mannered, and what is worst, judgmental. Second, when the Chinese students do business with international clients after graduating from colleges, they can identify what to do and what not to do to avoid culture appropriation or misinterpreting the messages. Therefore, students should be careful and culturally sensitive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2 An in-Class Experimental Teaching Method

Since March, 2017, the researcher has been teaching the course of cross-cultural communication in Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai (BITZH) in Guangdong Province, China. In order to arouse students' learning interests, the researcher has been searching for suitable teaching methods to meet students' academic needs. After the first semester's pilot study, the research chose participatory action research as the main investigation method.

### 2.1 Action Research

According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), action research as known as emancipatory research and two-way investigation. It can enhance pragmatic validity by including research participants, by brainstorming about data collection, and by analyzing and understanding the research findings (pp. 50–51)<sup>6</sup>. This is why many educators have labeled action research as “a collaborative research.” The five fundamental steps are: (1) identify the problem, (2) set up an achievable goal, (3) make a plan to solve the problem, (4) implement the plan, and (5) evaluate the intervention. These five steps make an action research loop. If the problem can't be solved in the first loop, researchers are highly recommended to identify the problem again and repeat these five steps in the second loop, even third, fourth, and so on until the problem is solved. Blair (2010) mentioned that action research is an educational research method to find out two different ways of the truth: behaviorism and constructivism. He further explained as follows:

Behaviourism hopes to learn about participants through observing what they do; for many behaviourists it is folly for researchers to make assumptions about the thinking processes of the participant, as this is not scientific. Constructivists take a different view and postulate that, since humans are cognitive and can describe their thoughts and the reasons behind their actions, then we should make use of such information (p. 352)<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> Hesse-Biber, S. N. & Leavy, P. (2011). *The practice of qualitative research* (2nd). USA: SAGE.

<sup>7</sup> Blair, E. (2010). How does telling the truth help educational action research?. *Educational Action Research*, 18(3), 349–358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2010.499810>.

## 2.2 Three Teaching Aids

With five steps of action research and while teaching students' cross-cultural communication course, the research identified the students' cultural struggle and blind spot: ideology. According to Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, ideology is "a manner of the content of thinking characteristic of an individual, group, or culture" and "the integrated assertions, theories and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program."<sup>8</sup> Gee (2008) argued that ideology also affect people's views, concepts, and definitions of every thing and term. For example, "a word like 'bachelor' means 'unmarried male.' (p. 6)"<sup>9</sup> After identifying ideology as the main problem of students' cross-cultural struggle, the researcher searched teaching aids to assist students in understanding different cultures and develop cultural empathy. However, few studies are related to this realm, not to mention, teaching aids. With personal in-class teaching experiences and interaction with students, the researcher has finally come up with three teaching aids to overcome students' existing ideology: pictures, video clips, and group discussion (GD). As Bhawuk and Brislin (2000) suggested that "trainers can use video films, slides, and other visual aids to show cultural differences"<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, in this participatory action research, the research adopted these three common teaching tools: pictures, video clips, and group discussions.

First, pictures are very handy to access and it has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Students can observe the information of the target pictures and follow teachers' guide to make comparisons and contrasts. Most Asian students can distinguish similarities and differences of a thing. Nevertheless, some teachers seldom take advantages of analyzing similarities and differences. For example, a teacher can put two pictures side by side and ask students to compare and to contrast both. By doing picture comparison and contrast, students can observe and pick up the clues by themselves.

Second, video clips are more vivid and tangible, compared with pictures. Video clips stimulate students' feelings and make them be sensitive to others' feelings, meaning that students can relate themselves to the characters in pictures or put themselves in people's shoes. Video clips can assist students in appreciating foreign cultures. By watching contexts and scenarios from video clips, students can generate some new ideas and deeply perceive entire cultural atmosphere. This is why most people prefer animation to a single picture. While teaching this course, the researcher always received more feedback from students. The reason is obvious: video clips provide visual and audio help, while pictures can only deliver visual image. According to Tseng (2017), "audio input such as movies, movie-clips, video-clips were also regularly incorporated in class" (p. 27). She further explained video clips "were used for students to watch and to reflect upon issues such as diversity within a society, high and low context culture, different communication styles across culture, work ethics,

<sup>8</sup> Ideology. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Retrieve from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ideology>.

<sup>9</sup> Gee, J. P. (2008). *Social linguistics and literacies* (3rd). New York, NY: Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> Bhawuk, D. P. S. & Brislin R. W. (2000). Cross-cultural training: A review. *Applied Psychology*, 49 (1), 162–191. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1464-0597.00009>.

gender roles, interracial marriages, and etc.” (p. 27). “Ted Talk” and “Voice Tubes” are two of the best examples for pro-video teaching<sup>11</sup>.

Third, group discussions (GD) are very common in Western classrooms while they are rare to appear in Eastern classrooms. GD can let students exchange their own ideas and different opinions based on the interactions among them. Many new ideas or thoughts can be generated by just talking to people. GD is very similar as Socratic method in philosophy. Through teacher-and-student or student-and-student conversation, discussion, or even debate, teachers can inspire students’ motivation to learn and guide them in walking on the path of cross-cultural communication.

### 3 Conclusion

With the three teaching aids (pictures, video clips, and group discussions), teachers can make their cross-cultural communication class more interesting and create a vivid learning atmosphere. Meanwhile, the information nowadays is updated swiftly. Adopting more on-line sources can benefit students’ knowledge acquisition, can keep them catch up with current international topics or issues, and can alleviate their stereotypes and broaden their international worldview.

### References

- Andrews, J.: How to avoid cultural appropriation at Coachella. Teen Vogue. Retrieved from <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/coachella-cultural-appropriation>
- Bhawuk, D.P.S., Brislin, R.W.: Cross-cultural training: a review. *Appl. Psychol.* **49**(1), 162–191 (2000). <https://doi.org/10.1111/1464-0597.00009>
- Blair, E.: How does telling the truth help educational action research? *Educ. Action Res.* **18**(3), 349–358 (2010). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2010.499810>
- Cultural Appropriation (n.d.): In Cambridge Dictionary. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/zht/詞典/英語/cultural-appropriation>
- Gee, J.P.: *Social Linguistics and Literacies*, vol. 3. Routledge, New York (2008)
- Hesse-Biber, S.N., Leavy, P.: *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, vol. 2. SAGE, USA (2011)
- Ideology (n.d.): In Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ideology>
- Rogers, R.A.: From cultural exchange to transculturation: a review and reconceptualization of cultural appropriation. *Commun. Theory* **16**(4), 474–503 (2006). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00277.x>
- Tam, L.: Those howling loudest about cultural appropriation over Utah schoolgirl wearing Qipao do not own the culture they claim to be defending. This is just another form of xenophobia. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/2146029/those-howling-loudest-about-cultural-appropriation-do-not-own-culture> (2018)

<sup>11</sup> Tseng, C. T. H. (2017). Teaching “Cross-cultural Communication” through content based instruction: Curriculum design and learning outcome from EFL learners’ perspectives. *English Language Teaching*, 10(4), 22–34. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n4p22>.

- Tseng, C.T.H.: Teaching “Cross-cultural Communication” through content based instruction: curriculum design and learning outcome from EFL learners’ perspectives. *Engl. Lang. Teach.* **10**(4), 22–34 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n4p22>
- Young, J.O.: Profound offense and cultural appropriation. *J. Aesthet. Art Crit.* **63**(2), 135–146 (2005). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-8529.2005.00190.x>