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Resources for intercultural learning in a non-essentialist perspective: an investigation of student and teacher perceptions in Chinese universities

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*

Resources for intercultural learning in a non-essentialist perspective: an investigation of student and teacher perceptions in Chinese universities / Borghetti, Claudia; Qin, Xiaolei. - In: LANGUAGE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION. - ISSN 1470-8477. - ELETTRONICO. - 22:5(2022), pp. 599-614. [10.1080/14708477.2022.2105344]

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/906099> since: 2022-11-23

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2022.2105344>

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This is the final peer-reviewed accepted manuscript of:

Claudia Borghetti & Xiaolei Qin (2022) Resources for intercultural learning in a non-essentialist perspective: an investigation of student and teacher perceptions in Chinese universities, *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 22:5, 599-614.

The final published version is available online at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2022.2105344>

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## Post-print

Borghetti, C. & Qin, X. (2022), "Resources for intercultural learning in a non-essentialist perspective: an investigation of student and teacher perceptions in Chinese universities", *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 22(5), pp. 599-614.

## **Resources for intercultural learning in a non-essentialist perspective: an investigation of student and teacher perceptions in Chinese universities**

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# **Resources for intercultural learning in a non-essentialist perspective: an investigation of student and teacher perceptions in Chinese universities**

## **Abstract (English)**

This paper presents the results of a study that shed light on how English language students and teachers in Chinese higher education experienced a set of interculturality-oriented teaching materials developed by the European RICH-Ed project (*Resources for Interculturality in Chinese Higher Education*). The investigation involved 2,267 students and 41 teachers, who had tested one of the teaching modules put forward by RICH-Ed to stimulate intercultural development in a non-essentialist perspective. Participants were asked their opinions either by means of interviews or questionnaires. Data were analysed thematically. Results show that participants expressed a need for: (1) better detailed step-by-step instructional procedures and learning guidelines; (2) theoretical explanations of non-essentialism made vivid through examples and cases; (3) increased use of audio-visual and web resources as teaching materials. Findings indicate that participants resisted the idea that there are no right and wrong answers when talking about cultural groups, and that learning is contextual, since it depends on the students' situated meanings and interpretation. While these results are linked to Chinese higher education, they are relevant in a plurality of contexts, considering that the systemic integration of intercultural learning – especially from a non-essentialist perspective – in language education is still incomplete in many educational settings.

**Keywords:** Chinese higher education; intercultural language education; teacher perspectives; student perspectives; non-essentialism; RICH-Ed

## **Abstract (Chinese)**

本文阐述了一项研究结果，该研究揭示了中国高等教育背景下师生对于由欧洲 RICH-Ed 项目(即“中国高校跨文化教育资源研究”)开发的跨文化教材的使用体验。研究对象包含 2,267 名学生和 41 名教师，他们至少体验了 RICH-Ed 项目开发的一个教学模块，从而从非本质主义的角度促进跨文化交际能力发展。本研究采访或问卷的方式调查研究对象

的意见，并按主题分析获得数据。研究结果表明研究对象需要：(1) 更详细的循序渐进的教学程序和学习指南；(2)通过实例和案例对非本质主义进行生动的理论解释；(3)更多的视听资源和网络资源作为教学材料。然而，研究对象并不认同有关“文化群体没有正误之分”以及“学生自身的情景意义和阐释决定了学习的背景”的观点。虽然这些结果深受中国高等教育体系影响，但它们仍与其他背景密不可分。鉴于跨文化学习的系统整合性，特别是从非本质主义的角度来看，它在许多教育环境中仍然不完整。

Keywords: 中国高等教育;跨文化语言学习; 教师视角; 学生视角; 非本质主义; 中国高校跨文化教育资源开发

## **1. Introduction**

The issue of how to foster intercultural learning in language education has been a topic of interest for decades (e.g., Byram, 1997, 2021; Garrett-Rucks, 2016; Risager, 2007). These reflections have largely resulted in pedagogical suggestions on how to foster interculturality in the classroom (Borghetti, 2013a; Byram et al., 2001; Corbett, 2010; Lázár et al., 2007). However, less is known regarding what students and teachers think about language courses that explicitly address intercultural finalities or how they make sense of the teaching methods and materials they encounter and use in such courses. Moreover, the existing investigations (e.g., Aleksandrowicz-Pedich et al., 2003; Gu, 2016; Han, 2010; Karabinar & Guler, 2013; Larzén-Östermark, 2008; Moloney et al., 2020; Sercu et al., 2005) have not addressed instances of intercultural language education (ILE) that are inspired by a non-essentialist view of culture (e.g., Holliday, 2011).

Focussing on the context of Chinese Higher Education, this paper aims to start filling this gap. It presents the results of a study which shed light on how students and teachers in

Chinese universities experienced a set of interculturality-oriented teaching materials developed by the European RICH-Ed project (*Resources for Interculturality in Chinese Higher Education*; <http://www.rich-ed.com/>). More specifically, the investigation involved 2,267 students and 41 teachers, who had tested at least one of the teaching modules put forward by the project to stimulate intercultural development in a non-essentialist perspective.

The article starts by outlining some key concepts which inform the study from a theoretical point of view (§2). Then, it introduces the RICH-Ed project and its pedagogical underpinnings in some detail (§3), before focussing on the study's aims, participants, data collection, and analysis (§4). The following section (§5) reports the results, which will later serve as a basis to put forward some pedagogical implications (§6) and general conclusions (§7).

## **2. Intercultural language education**

Since the '90s, research in language education has experienced a progressive but decisive shift of attention from the cultural dimension of language learning and teaching (whereby, for example, one learns the French language and culture) to a broader intercultural perspective. According to this 'intercultural turn' (Borghetti, 2013b; Holmes, 2014), experiencing a target 'linguaculture' in class (Agar, 1994; Risager, 2007) represents for the students an opportunity to develop knowledge, attitudes, and skills, which are potentially useful to understand a plurality of linguacultures, including their own (Byram, 1997, 2021). In other words, while teaching a specific language, teachers need to prepare their pupils to engage with cultures other than the one they are specifically addressing as well as help the class decentre their own cultural

groups. In the light of this distinction between “teaching culture” and “intercultural education”, it is evident that one can only properly speak of “intercultural language education” (as well as of “intercultural learning”, “intercultural competence”, “interculturality”, and so on) by assuming the second approach, which goes beyond the binomial “target language - target culture”.

More recently, discourses dedicated to intercultural language education have been re-framed within a non-essentialist view of culture (e.g., Holliday, 2011; Piller 2011), in which “culture” can be defined as any group whose members feel part of the same community because they share common goals as well as create and recreate a joint imaginary for themselves as a union (Kramsch, 1998). In respect to intercultural language education, a main consequence of this approach is the need to re-conceptualise national belonging as just one possible dimension of diversity while realizing that interpersonal encounters can also be intercultural when people of different age, language, gender, socio-economic background, etc. interact with each other. Therefore, according to this theoretical perspective, language students are no longer only invited to identify and deconstruct national, religious, or ethnic stereotypes; they are also encouraged to think beyond other kinds of essentialised images, such as generational, gender-based, and professional ones.

In order to contextualise the RICH-Ed project and the study, we will further explore the two shifts mentioned above. First, we discuss some key concepts which have led language education research beyond teaching culture (§2.1). Second, we argue the reasons it is appropriate to redefine “culture” in non-essentialist terms (§2.2). Before delving into these issues, it is however worth mentioning that, while a new (non-essentialist) paradigm for



intercultural language education is advocated (Borghetti, 2019; Cole & Meadows, 2013; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), the previous “intercultural turn” has still not been fully implemented in language education in China (Jin & Dervin, 2017) as elsewhere (Byram et al., 2013; Holliday, 2011).

## ***2.1 Beyond teaching culture***

In general, teaching culture has entailed providing students with *knowledge* about the target culture in terms of customs, values, communication styles (e.g., in formal vs informal situations), shared or contested national memories, institutional organisations such educational systems, and so on. On the contrary, since the intercultural turn in language education, these items of information represent only a specific dimension of intercultural learning. This is evident in Byram’s model of intercultural competence (IC) (1997, 2021), where ‘knowledge’ is but one of five components of learning, namely ‘knowledge’, ‘attitudes’, ‘skills of interpreting and relating’, ‘skills of discovery and interaction’, and ‘critical cultural awareness’. As the relationship among these dimensions is one of interdependence (Byram, 2021), language teachers should not just promote the acquisition of new facts about the target culture (and the students’ own groups), but create the conditions for the learners to develop:

- *Attitudes* of curiosity and openness toward diversity, as well as of willingness to suspend belief in their own values, in order to experience the others’ viewpoints without preconceptions.
- *Skills of interpreting and relating* cultural facts to one another. These skills entail analysing knowledge about one’s own and the other’s groups, identifying potential

relations among them, identifying implicit meanings and ethnocentric perspectives in documents, and so on.

- *Skills of discovery* to gain new information about cultures (e.g., the ability to detect reliable sources) and *skills of interaction*, namely the capacity to draw upon knowledge, attitudes, and skills to manage intercultural encounters and their possible dysfunctions.
- *Critical cultural awareness*, namely the ‘ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of an explicit, systematic process of reasoning, values present in one’s own and other cultures and countries’ (Byram, 2021, p. 78), which can possibly lead to questioning one’s own previous beliefs and values.

While in principle IC development (i.e., intercultural learning) can occur through experience alone, it is well known (e.g., Alred et al., 2003; Jackson & Oguro, 2018) that the cognitive, affective, and behavioural changes it entails need forms of critical reflection, which can be better fostered in class, collaboratively with peers and the teacher.

It is thus not surprising that *teaching a method*, *criticality*, and *interaction* represent key principles in intercultural pedagogy in general education (Barrett et al., 2013; IEREST, 2015) as well as in language education. As for the latter, these three principles will be briefly touched on here because they help offer a general overview of the countless publications concerning how to foster intercultural learning in the language classroom. First, class activities should provide the students with a *critical method of observation of cultural facts*, which allows them to put different pieces of information in relation to one another or systematically compare unfamiliar cultural practices with their own. Focussing on “the how” (i.e., method) rather than on “the what” (i.e., knowledge) equips the learners with critical tools that they can then

potentially apply to any additional cultural fact (Byram, 1997, 2021). Second, the learners should be invited to reflect on their own interpretation processes, and to identify and challenge their assumptions. Self-reflection or *criticality* is crucial in intercultural learning, as people tend to take for granted their standpoints and to impose them on others (Houghton & Yamada, 2012). Moreover, as implied in the notion of “critical cultural awareness”, critical thinking allows the students to link the individual and the social spheres (e.g., Guilherme, 2002), by experiencing how their personal stances—as well as those of others—are often conditioned by dominant discourses and ideologies. Finally, it is important to situate learning in the students’ experience and thus foster *class interaction* (Kearney, 2016; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013); language classes should no longer be seen as the protected environments where learners prepare themselves for “real” (i.e., out-of-class) intercultural exchange (Byram, 1997, 2021), but the very place for such encounters, considering that even the most homogeneous group of students offers a variety of perspectives on the class topics and activities (Borghetti, 2019).

## ***2.2 Toward a non-essentialist approach to culture***

Even though different varieties of the same language have been always spoken in different geographical areas, the assumption that a language has to be taught together with “its” culture has not received much attention until recently. As pointed out by Borghetti (2019), this taken-for-granted practice has proven to be problematic only as research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has started addressing the issue of what culture must be taught in English classes in view of ELF uses (e.g., Baker, 2015), despite how authoritative works had already highlighted that the language-culture nexus is problematic (e.g., Risager, 2006, 2007). Adopting

a non-essentialist definition of “culture” in language education (e.g., Cole & Meadows, 2013; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Rivers & Houghton, 2013) can make a crucial contribution in this sense. The ~~very~~ idea that cultural groupings can be based on various dimensions (generational, social, professional, etc.) serves to contest the shared assumption that cultures can only be conceptualised in national terms. Moreover, the very existence of many diverse interconnected cultures makes it evident that an individual cannot help but belong to more than one culture (for example, a person can be – all at the same time – English, Muslim, part of the professional culture of physicians, member of the interest group of an online chess community, and so on). Finally, this conceptualisation helps deconstruct the view of national cultures as internally homogeneous and undifferentiated, which still tends to predominate in language education worldwide (Holliday, 2011). These ‘misconceptions’ are also identifiable in China, where however new approaches to intercultural language education are envisaged (Holmes et al., 2022; this journal issue).

While principles like the ones summarised above seem to be largely ignored in the current teaching practice (e.g., Díaz, 2016; Rivers & Houghton, 2013), it is worth underlining that this theoretical shift ‘does not require the adoption of new teaching methods nor the design of dedicated class activities; rather, it invites us to rethink the existing in the light of “new” theoretical input’ (Borghetti, 2019, p. 30). For example, students are still to be introduced to a *critical method of observation of cultural facts* (§2.1), but they should be shown how to apply it to a variety of cultural groups (e.g., based on socioeconomic status or political orientation). Similarly, *criticality* and *interaction* remain decisive principles, yet they need to be practiced on dimensions of diversity which go beyond (but do not exclude) the national one.

### 3. The RICH-Ed project

The RICH-Ed project (*Resources for Interculturality in Chinese Higher Education*; <http://www.rich-ed.com>) was a Capacity Building project co-funded by the European Commission between 2017 and 2021, which aimed to develop, test and disseminate resources for intercultural language education for Chinese higher education. Three European and five Chinese universities formed the consortium.

The project designed eight teaching modules targeting Chinese college students and five modules to be used as training resources with non-academic university staff. Learning objectives and outputs, contents and teaching procedures for all modules were established on the basis of the results obtained from preliminary research reviewing intercultural education practices adopted in Chinese universities. Moreover, RICH-Ed owes some of its characteristics to another European project, IEREST (*Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers*, LLP 2012-2015, <http://www.ierest-project.eu/>), which had designed a set of teaching modules of intercultural education for Erasmus students.

Overall, the RICH-Ed teaching package<sup>1</sup> provides several scenarios in which intercultural encounters can take place (in the workplace, in the students' local context as well as abroad, when one is exposed to products embedded in different cultural environments, etc.). All modules are organised in four or five activities and contain a learner and a teacher/trainer version. Each version provides detailed descriptions of the module, for the former group to receive guidance and for the latter to have precise guidelines when adapting the resource 'to

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<sup>1</sup> All RICH-Ed modules are downloadable from <http://www.rich-ed.com/index.php?s=/List/index/cid/15.html>.

accommodate diverse groups of learners, their abilities, and their institutional contexts' (RICH-Ed, 2021a, p. 7). For example, the 'Time required' in average to carry out an activity in class is made explicit, the resources to be prepared in advance are listed in a section titled 'Teaching preparation', and a complete 'Lesson plan' is provided, which specifies each teaching step (e.g., 'Distribute Attachment 1 to the students', 'Place students into small groups of five to six'; RICH-Ed, 2021b, p. 6). Notably, there is no pre-established order for teaching the modules, nor is it necessary to teach all the activities in a module. This feature is mainly due to the fact that, in contrast to what happens with textbooks, no progression of learning is implied in the configuration of the modules, which are numbered only for the users' convenience.

As it was for IEREST, the theoretical approach assumed within RICH-Ed is non-essentialist (Holliday, 2011); students and administrative staff are thus encouraged to explore their own and others' multiple senses of belonging beyond that of national identity. Methodologically, the project's educational aims are pursued with a learning-by-doing approach, inspired by Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984): learners and trainees are thus presented with authentic materials (e.g., blogs, videos, brochures, news report) and asked to engage in tasks by writing personal journals, interviewing other students, etc. Theory is usually introduced at a later stage in each module in order to encourage critical reflection.

It is important to note that the RICH-Ed modules are accompanied by a Pedagogic framework (RICH-Ed, 2021a) and a glossary of key concepts that carefully explain the theoretical underpinnings of the teaching package. These supplemental documents were designed to help teachers and trainers use and adapt the models to specific contexts.

#### **4. The study**

As part of the project, the modules and the Pedagogic framework were tested in 15 Chinese universities. Feedback from English language students and teachers (as well as from trainees and trainers) was collected by means of questionnaires and interviews. The objective of this RICH-Ed action was to revise the teaching/training resources before publication. Thus, special attention was given to the users' suggestions for improvement and/or critical comments about the modules and their implementation.

Within this broad action of data collection and analysis, the present study relies on a specific set of data. First, as the overall aim is to investigate how students and teachers experienced the resources, all feedback related to the training sessions with administrative and management staff was excluded from the analysis. Moreover, for reasons linked to the project timeline, the corpus only includes the opinions of teachers and students who had tested five of the eight modules meant for them. Finally, as explained later (§4.3), as for both questionnaires and interviews, we focussed exclusively on open questions, since they allowed respondents to express their thoughts in a clearer and more informative way.

##### ***4.1 Research questions***

The aim of this study is to explore in detail what kind of critical observations students and teachers made on the teaching materials during the project testing phase (Question 1). In addition, to align with specific objectives of the RICH-Ed project, we investigated the participants' attitudes and opinions towards intercultural language education within a non-essentialist perspective (Question 2).

## ***4.2 Participants***

As anticipated, 2,267 students and 41 teachers took part in the study. They come from 15 Chinese higher education institutions in the two target regions: the Yangtze River Delta and North-East China.

The participating teachers were all teachers of English as a Foreign Language and had more than ten years of teaching experience on average. To ensure the teachers' qualification to teach the resources, they were expressly trained by the RICH-Ed partners. Primarily based on the Pedagogic framework (RICH-Ed, 2021a), these trainings introduced the project's theoretical underpinnings (including non-essentialism) and the methodological rationale of the teaching package (e.g., the learning-by-doing approach).

Learners from different years of study and various majors—including both English-major and non-English-major students—were involved in the data collection. They had studied English for over 12 years on average, thus most had an upper-intermediate level of English language proficiency.

## ***4.3 Data collection***

Using questionnaires and interviews, students and teachers were asked their opinions on the RICH-Ed modules and their possible uses. In spite of this shared aim, the two collection tools had different features.

Questionnaires for both students and teachers consisted of closed<sup>2</sup> and open questions.

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<sup>2</sup> Besides some background information (age, institution, major, etc.), the closed items asked



As anticipated, this study only considered the latter, which were meant to elicit more detailed feedback from respondents. Both questionnaires had four open questions. All these items are reported in Table 1.

[Table 1 near here]

In terms of administration, at the end of the tested RICH-Ed module, students were provided with a QR code, which directed them to two versions of the questionnaire, one in English and the other in Chinese. Teachers received only the English variant and via email in a .docx format.

The interviews were conducted in written form as well. In this case, however, the closed questions were only used to collect background information. Table 2 reports the open questions (i.e., those relevant for this study), which were divided into categories with 4 questions for students and 7 for teachers.

[Table 2 near here]

Participant students and teachers were invited by the RICH-Ed local coordinators to take part in the interviews, which were administrated by email. Overall, 177 students and 19 teachers returned their answers. Thus, these participated in the study by means of both the questionnaire

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respondents to rate a set of statements, expressing their opinion about the tested module on scales from 1 ('Poor') to 4 ('Excellent'). Such statements were divided into four categories ('Concept', 'Skills', 'Cultural awareness', and 'Appropriacy'); the teacher questionnaire presented an additional category ('Layout and design'). Thus, overall, learners were asked to answer 9 closed questions and teachers answered 16.

and the interview.

In conclusion, overall, the study was conducted on four corpora, whose size is reported in Table 3.

[Table 3 near here]

#### ***4.4 Data analysis***

The participants' responses to open questions were first grouped into four sets of data, according to category of respondents (teachers and students) and collection tool (questionnaire and interviews). As many excel sheets were created, which reported the resulting labels, i.e., "Student questionnaire", "Student interview", "Teacher questionnaire", and "Teacher interview". Participants' answers were listed in different rows, no matter what question and what specific respondent they came from. The students' extracts written in Chinese were then translated into English by one of the authors.

Second, in alignment with a RICH-Ed project objective (§4), we removed from the data the many positive remarks made on the effectiveness or appropriateness of the modules (e.g., examples like 'Everything is excellent' or 'good material selection, strict logical thinking, very suitable').

Third, each extract from all sets of data was provided with an identification code, which reported the relevant category of respondent ("T" = "teacher" vs "S" = "student"), the type of collection tool ("INT" = "interview" vs "QUE" = "questionnaire"), and the module which had been tested ("ModuleN", with "N" which ranged between 1 and 5). For example, an extract

identification code could be “S\_INT\_Module3”, meaning that a student was expressing her/his opinion on Module 3 during an interview.

Finally, all sets of data were analysed thematically (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006), and interpretative codes were identified manually on the entire corpus by one of the authors. Table 4 shows the final categories and codes employed for the analysis.

[Table 4 near here]

As a participant’s answer could present multiple items of information that were of interest, the number of coded extracts far exceeds the total number of questionnaire and interview responses. The approach adopted for the analysis was mainly data-driven, even if the research questions necessarily made some data more salient than others. When necessary, the answers provided by respondents in other sections of the questionnaire/interview were consulted to make sense of specific extracts.

## **5. Results**

The analysis resulted in identifying a plurality of themes in students’ and teachers’ perceptions, which ranged from the limited relevance of the topics covered in the modules to the respondents’ educational contexts, to time issues (e.g., enough or not enough time spent on specific tasks) and the suggested teaching phases and methods. However, three broad macro-themes – all linked to the research questions, though in different ways – seem to be particularly coherent and consistent internally as well as highly shared by the teacher and the student groups. As for

Question 1, teachers expressed a need for better detailed step-by-step instructional procedures and students asked for more explicit learning guidelines (§5.1); moreover, both groups asked for an increased use of audio-visual and web resources as teaching materials (§5.3). In relation to Question 2, teachers and students desired theoretical explanations of non-essentialism to be made more accessible through examples and cases (§5.2).

### ***5.1 Need for better detailed instructions***

Although the RICH-Ed modules and the related Pedagogic Framework (RICH-Ed, 2021a) explained in detail the theoretical orientation of the teaching package and gave precise instructions on how to use the resources in class (§3), teachers pointed out that the modules did not offer precise pedagogical directions on how to carry out the activities (Extract 1) and students complained for lack of support in learning (Extract 2).

#### *Extract 1*

Some activities are hard to carry out. The direction is vague [...] [T\_INT]<sup>3</sup>

#### *Extract 2*

The perspective adopted in this activity is so vague that I cannot accurately grasp its connotation [S\_INT]

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<sup>3</sup> The identification codes of the extracts selected for inclusion in the present paper do not report the information of what module the comments referred to, as evaluating how well each module was received goes beyond the scope of this work.

Comments like the ones reported in Extracts 1 and 2 proved to be very useful to improve the RICH-Ed modules for final publication, which were indeed enriched with additional information and more detailed instructions in their final versions. It is however noteworthy that teachers expressed their suggestions in ways that reveal a sense of uncertainty and frustration. They suggested that they would like to ‘study’ before teaching and, interestingly, to create a sort of open dialogue with the module developers (Extracts 3).

*Extract 3*

I would appreciate to have more PPT to facilitate my teaching because if PPT provided, I can study the PPT before teaching and take it as if communicating with the author of this module [T\_INT]

Some common responses were to request dedicated training sessions (Extract 4), more detailed ‘interpretation’ of the materials (Extract 5) and case analyses (Extract 6).

*Extract 4*

Could there be any webinar or offline workshop mainly about teaching methods or teaching stories to share? [...] Some training course for teachers, like 1 or 2 times per year or regular share of materials [T\_INT]

*Extract 5*

[...] detailed interpretation of the activities and the materials are welcome [T\_INT]

*Extract 6*

I would like to be suggested “Ways to analyze the case” [T\_INT]

Extracts like the 5 and 6 demonstrate how teachers struggled with one main feature of RICH-Ed, namely that the project provides classroom resources (including “cases” such as discussion documents, videos, and critical incidents) and their possible interpretations without offering final (“right” vs “wrong”) answers about them. The same approach was adopted in IEREST (2015) and in the majority of intercultural educational resources produced after the “intercultural turn” in language education (§2.1). The reason for this approach is to be found in the three principles of intercultural language education summarised above (§2.1). After all, going beyond culture teaching means showing the learners how to analyse and compare cultural facts rather than handing them pre-packaged knowledge about the others’ groups and their own. For example, one of the RICH-Ed modules (2021c) provides video advertisements to be used within the classroom for teaching purposes; however, the purpose of the advertisement is to provide an opportunity for the students to critically analyse intercultural content (i.e., soundtrack, who is and is not featured) rather than take the advertisement at face value. This focussing on the “how” necessarily prevents the teachers (and the educational resources) from anticipating what specific characteristics the students will notice in the documents and stories provided (e.g., Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). This unpredictably also stems from the other two principles of intercultural language education in that different learners can find diverse features of the teaching materials salient for them, according to their own stories and interpretation

processes (Holmes et al., 2022; this journal issue); likewise, investing in class discussion (and thus on a plurality of individual viewpoints) makes it very difficult to predict the trajectories potentially undertaken by the class reasoning (e.g., Borghetti, 2019; Kearney, 2016).

Thus, going back to the teachers' perceptions, it is evident that their concerns cannot be met entirely. Even when properly revised for final publication, the RICH-Ed materials cannot anticipate what specific opportunities for intercultural learning the activities will be fostered in a given context. No teaching resource after the "intercultural turn" can do that. Thus, to a certain extent, teachers need to renounce the comfort zone of precise instructional procedures and learn to cope with uncertainty. On the other hand, as we will argue in §6, the teachers' sense of inadequacy as well as their expectations toward what teaching materials should provide cannot be totally ignored – in ILE as well as in other educational areas.

### ***5.2 Discomfort with theoretical explanations***

Another highly internally-consistent theme contained in teacher reports was that RICH-Ed theory was difficult for students to grasp. Extracts 7 and 8 report just two examples of how they perceived the project conceptual underpinnings.

#### *Extract 7*

The theory part is difficult for the students to understand [T\_INT]

#### *Extract 8*

The Theoretical part is difficult for our students. They have difficulty in learning it

[T\_QUE]

While these reactions are understandable considering the novelty of a non-essentialist approach in language education (e.g., Díaz, 2016), in some cases (Extract 9) teachers went so far as to suggest cutting out conceptual underpinnings completely even though they constitute the core of intercultural education as conceived within a non-essentialist perspective and thus of RICH-Ed as a whole.

*Extract 9*

[The students] had problems understanding the term ‘essentialism’. It is quite a new idea for them. [...]. [One could] cut off the unnecessary and difficult terms such as ‘essentialism’, and add lead-in activities to put across the important idea ‘interculture’

[T\_INT]

However, the most prevalent comments are more moderate. As exemplified by Extracts 10, 11, and 12, while still manifesting their discomfort with the suggested theories, many teachers put forward useful suggestions to make the theory more accessible and interesting for the students.

*Extract 10*

Perhaps reduce the theoretical part [...]. With more examples and cases, the materials will be more interesting [T\_INT]



*Extract 11*

The theoretical part may be too heavy for the students if they are not linguistic students.

Play down the theoretical part and increase discussion of examples [T\_QUE]

*Extract 12*

[...] I think it should have more examples or stories, less theories and terms. The first aim of the activity is to attract students. But theories and terms will make it boring

[T\_INT]

Comments like the ones reported in Extracts 10, 11, and 12 are very common within the reports. They are of interest because they reveal the teachers' suggestions on how to overcome the complexity of the theoretical underpinnings. According to the respondents, 'more examples and cases', 'discussion of examples', and 'examples or stories' might make the theory more accessible by fostering the students' motivation to learn (e.g., 'materials will be more interesting', 'the first aim of the activity is to attract students').

As for the students' perceptions, the learners also suggested including additional examples, although for more reasons than the teachers provided. First, concrete examples and cases can facilitate learning by relating abstract concepts to the learners' own experience (Extracts 13, 14, and 15).

*Extract 13*

[...] the theory is too abstract to be understood. the theory should be expressed with more

general and practical examples. let the students experience in the examples. [...]

[S\_QUE]

*Extract 14*

[...] it only introduces some abstract concepts without giving examples, which may make my understanding incomplete. [...] [S\_INT]

*Extract 15*

I think the examples aren't enough for us. I like using examples. Not only can make us easier to uderstand ,but also they can make classes more interesting [S\_QUE]

The view of learning that emerges from the students' accounts aligns with Kolb's experiential approach to learning (1984) which inspires RICH-Ed. Nevertheless, the learners clearly demonstrate the need for a better link between the 'concrete experience' phase and the later phases (especially 'abstract conceptualisation'). As a matter of fact, they may be right, as the Pedagogic framework explicitly states that:

The modules, taking inspiration from this experiential approach to learning, do not necessarily follow Kolb's (1984) cycle explicitly and in the order presented above, particularly, as the content in some of the modules aligns more with certain phases of the cycle than with others. (RICH-Ed, 2021a, p. 16)

Overall, these reports were very useful for improving classroom resources. Furthermore, they offer insight as to what kind of learning experience the students in higher education expect from ILE – and possibly from teaching at large.

In addition to these mainly cognitive-oriented concerns, the analysis helped identify another theme in which, just like teachers, students emphasise their motivational dynamics: specific examples or cases ‘make classes more interesting’ (the second part of Extract 15), more enjoyable (Extract 16) and thus less boring (Extract 17).

*Extract 16*

I don't like learn some theories without any specific examples or cases [S\_INT]

*Extract 17*

It should be boring theoretical knowledge, without case reference and video [S\_INT]

Interestingly, the last extract also mentions videos. This sort of references leads to the third main overarching theme which emerged from the analysis, namely that participants preferred multimodal texts as inputs in intercultural language education.

### ***5.3 Preference for multimodality***

Video materials are at the core of another consistent result, namely that participants favoured a multimodal approach in introducing, experiencing, and making sense of intercultural phenomena. This preference seems to be due to a number of reasons.

First, in the teachers' perspective, videos provide authenticity, as students can better experience dimensions of diversity they are not familiar with (Extracts 18 and 19).

*Extract 18*

More video can provide authentic materials, real context of intercultural transition

[T\_INT]

*Extract 19*

I would suggest more authentic video to be added to the learning material [T\_QUE]

These accounts seem to resonate well with most research in intercultural language education after the 'intercultural turn' (e.g., Byram et al., 2002). This research, however, does not value authenticity per se; rather, it encourages teachers to prepare critical reading activities so that students learn how to challenge representations of diversity portrayed in videos, Internet sources, photographs, cartoons, etc. In other words, the intercultural value of using media that portrays different groups of people lies in teaching students how to analyse the authentic materials they are exposed to rather than the content of the media itself.

A second reason why both teachers and students consider videos and visual aids useful is that they facilitate learning (Extracts 20, 21, and 22); a third reason is that multimodality is motivating and engaging for the learners (Extracts 23, 24, and 25).

*Extract 20*

[...] More videos. That will help students understand some difficult points [...] [T\_INT]

*Extract 21*

i think we can add videos to the learning materials so that students can remember them better,just like watching a movie, students will be deeply impressed [S\_QUE]

*Extract 22*

The narration of the article is too single, and the things narrated do not make me feel bright in front of my eyes. The whole process of the material is described in words. If there are some pictures, I believe it will have a better effect [S\_INT]

*Extract 23*

I hope to get more video material about the module, because students could be more interested in watching some institute culture cases. [T\_INT]

*Extract 24*

It is a little bit boring while students are required to read the materials because the time was too long and it may be easy to distract the students. I think it is better to make the story more active by showing some videos related to the topic to students [S\_INT]

*Extract 25*

I'm more interested in videos or pictures [S\_QUE]

Interestingly, one teacher coherently connects all three reasons (Extract 26): because of their authenticity ('shot in real spots'), videos can promote learning ('the students could handle the topic much better') and increase learners' engagement in class discussion and activities (they could be 'more active to talk and act in class').

*Extract 26*

If the materials could be more updated, like video clips shot in real spots or some youtube clips that once raised hot public discussion, we believe the students could handle the topic much better and would be more active to talk and act in class [T\_QUE]

A final type of comment worth mentioning are the ones reporting the initiatives taken by teachers to overcome the problem of insufficient videos in the RICH-Ed resources (Extract 27).

*Extract 27*

My students prefer to learn more from videos instead of from reading, so I added two short videos [...] [T\_INT]

Here the teacher has reported her efforts taken to supplement the RICH-Ed resources; as stated, she/he took inspiration from the modules and changed them to meet her/his students' learning preferences and styles. This is exactly what the Pedagogic framework invites teachers to do:

‘[they] will need to adapt the modules and associated activities to their own working contexts, considering the needs and abilities of their students’ (RICH-Ed, 2021a, p. 3). This is clearly true for the perceived lack of multimodal support as well as for other features of the teaching package. RICH-Ed is not ready-made, no teaching material is. Textbooks and other ILE resources are not ‘a collection of golden rules’ for teachers and learners to follow (Wang, 2017, p. 36). Rather, as pointed out by Liddicoat and Scarino:

[...] resources can be used in multiple ways. The key is to have resources that open up multiple possible uses rather than resources that are limited or constrained and which narrow the possible teaching and learning opportunities available. Each resource should be used as effectively as possible and each resource should allow for flexibility and creativity in teaching and learning. (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 84)

The RICH-Ed modules, as well as ILE teaching resources in general, serve as initial inputs to elicit class interaction (§2.1), the direction of which is not fully predictable since it depends on what students consider salient for their own intercultural experiences and learning processes. Whether it is selecting additional videos, deleting or integrating activities, or bending the instructions provided, teachers necessarily have to take responsibility for making changes to teaching materials for the sake of their students’ learning.

## **6. Discussion and conclusions**

The findings presented in the previous section have proven very useful for capturing the

experiences of the RICH-Ed users during the project lifecycle and, thus, for making informed decisions on how to revise the modules. For example, before publication the project partners supplied the teaching package with further instructions (§5.1), more detailed explanations of theoretical concepts (§5.2), and additional multimodal aids (§5.3).

Even if the study is necessarily linked to one of the project's objectives, we argue that it shows something more, as it helps make sense of how teachers and students perceive and approach intercultural language education in general terms.

First, our findings show that apparently both groups found it challenging to see intercultural learning and teaching as an open space of possibilities, rather than based on a pre-established set of content or ideas. Their insistence on the need for instructions, guidelines, case solutions, etc. seems to indicate that most of them resist the idea that there are no right and wrong answers when talking about cultural groups, as well as that learning is contextual, as it mainly depends on the students' situated meanings and interpretation (e.g., Houghton & Yamada, 2012; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Overall, on the teachers' side, it appears that there is still lack of awareness that ILE implies 'managing "learning out of control"'; the learners' experiences, doubts, curiosity, and interpretations are unpredictable, as are their learning opportunities which cannot fully be anticipated by any teaching material. Under this respect, it is arguable whether the detailed Pedagogic framework (RICH-Ed, 2021a) and the trainings based on it (§4) reached in fact the goal to familiarize the teachers with the idea that ILE requires them 'to manage a class whose progression is marked by digressions, deferments and unexpected events; a class that – instead of a linear text – is a co-managed web of educational possibilities' (Borghetti, 2013a, p. 16). While possible inadequacies in RICH-Ed resources and



trainings may well explain why teachers encountered this sort of difficulties, our data do not allow going beyond conjectures, as they give no access to the teachers' accounts of their experiences with the Pedagogic framework and the trainings.

Second, as highlighted in relation to the third overarching theme (i.e., the perceived lack of multimodality in the pedagogical resources; §5.3), most of the teacher and student recommendations implied a demanding attitude toward learning and teaching materials. While a few personal initiatives of resource adaptations were mentioned, most participants seemed to expect from RICH-Ed what textbooks typically provide, namely progression of learning, detailed systematic instructions, precise activities with exact answers, and so on. Again, at least in the case of the teachers, this may be due to inadequate support and training. In any case, as stressed earlier (§5.3), this apparent lack of autonomy and flexibility is potentially problematic for RICH-Ed as well as for intercultural language education in general, since no resource can do the teachers' job and meet the peculiarities and necessities of a specific educational context.

Thirdly, the participants' expectations about the modules need to be addressed. Although it cannot be guaranteed that the students' and teachers' responses accurately reflect their final opinion on the modules,<sup>4</sup> the anxiety they expressed in their feedback cannot be ignored. This leads to the third and last discussion point, which also reframes the previous ones. If intercultural education has to be fully integrated into foreign language teaching, ILE research

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<sup>4</sup> The participants' attitudes and opinions towards the RICH-Ed materials might be influenced by the fact that, when data collection took place, most of them were testing their first module; some classes only tried out additional resources at the later stage. Thus, one cannot rule out that the comments analysed for this study were in response to a change in students' and teachers' usual practices rather than to the characteristics of the modules themselves. It is even conceivable that, after [more](#) becoming familiar with the resources and their theoretical underpinnings, these same participants then developed different beliefs from those we have recorded and analysed.

needs to take into account the teachers' and the students' perceptions, including their concerns and expectations. This should be done both by offering as precise teaching and learning guidelines as possible and, importantly, by making teachers aware that learning outcomes can only result from assuming responsibility for teaching methodology (materials, activities, and procedures) and class interaction. These two goals are all the more important when intercultural development is inspired by a non-essentialist view of culture, which is particularly unfamiliar to language teachers in China as elsewhere (Díaz, 2016; Rivers & Houghton, 2013).

In conclusion, we would like to highlight that, although these results are linked to RICH-Ed and thus to Chinese higher education specifically, they could be relevant in a plurality of contexts, considering that the systemic integration of intercultural learning – especially from a non-essentialist perspective – in language education is still incomplete in many educational settings.

### **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by the European Commission, under the Erasmus+ Programme (Action Type: Capacity Building in higher education; project reference number – 585733-EPP-1-2017-1-BE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP). We would also like to thank the students and the teachers who took part in the study, as well as the RICH-Ed partners who developed the teaching resources and helped administer questionnaires and interviews.

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Table 1. Open questions in the student and teacher questionnaires

Category	Student questionnaire	Teacher questionnaire
Concept	What new concepts about intercultural communication have you gained after studying this learning material?	Do the suggested extended learning tasks facilitate your teaching? If yes, please specify how you make use of the tasks. If not, which changes would you suggest?
Skills	Are there any particular skills you hoped would be focused on more?	Did the learning material skim or skip over any particular skills you hoped would be focused on more? If so, which skills?
Cultural awareness	What new understanding about intercultural communication have you gained after studying this learning material?	What new understanding about intercultural communication have the learners gained after studying this learning material?
Appropriacy	Which elements in the learning material do you consider less appropriate? What changes do you recommend?	Which elements in the learning material do you consider less appropriate? What changes do you recommend?

Table 2. Open questions in the student and teacher interviews

Category	Student questionnaire	Teacher questionnaire
Content	<p>1. Are the materials in the learning materials appropriate for your age, background, needs and interests? Please give examples.</p> <p>2. What do you like most about the activities in the learning material?</p> <p>3. What do you like least about the activities?</p>	<p>1. Are the activities in the learning materials appropriate for the learners? Please give examples.</p> <p>2. What do you like most about the activities in the learning material? Why?</p> <p>3. What do you like least about the activities? Why?</p>
Intercultural communication understanding	<p>4. Will the topics help expand your intercultural awareness and enrich your intercultural experience? Please give some examples.</p>	<p>4. How did the topics help expand learners' intercultural awareness and enrich your intercultural experience? Please give some examples.</p>
Pedagogical Analysis		<p>5. How could this activity be improved upon to work better for you and your students?</p> <p>6. What would you appreciate as additional support in order to teach activities like these?</p> <p>7. What's the most impressive difference of the learning material compared with other previous intercultural communication learning materials you know?</p>

Table 3. Size of the corpora

Respondent category	Collection tool	Number of words
Students	Questionnaire	94086
	Interview	39375
Teachers	Questionnaire	1435
	Interview	4908

Table 4. Final categories and codes employed for the analysis

Category	Subcategory	Code
Students' English proficiency	Problem: Written comprehension Problem: Oral comprehension Problem: Communication Solution: Bilingual education Solution: Images Solution: Videos (and subtitles)	E_P_WP E_P_OC E_P_C E_S_BE E_S_I E_S_V
Readings	Problem: Too much Problem: Too long Problem: Too difficult Solution: Images Solution: Videos	R_P_TM R_P_TL R_P_TD R_S_I R_S_V
Teaching phases and methods	Problem: Lack of directions in general Problem: Lack of exercise solutions Problem: Lack of guidelines for class discussion Problem: Lack of guidelines for text analysis	P_P_GD P_P_ES P_P_CD P_P_TA
Teaching materials	Problem: Out of date Problem: Boring Solution: Examples Solution: Videos	M_P_O M_P_B M_S_E M_S_V
Theory (non-essentialism)	Problem: Too much Problem: Too difficult Solution: Examples Solution: Videos Solution: Skipping	NE_P_TM NE_P_TD NE_S_E NE_S_V NE_S_S
Time-related issues	Problem: No time enough	TI_P_T
Topics	Problem: No experience abroad Problem: No experience in workplaces Problem: No experience with foreigners Problem: No relevant in general	TO_P_EA TO_P_EW TO_P_EF TO_P_R