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Enhancing Cross-Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Communication Skills: A Practical Example of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language through AAPI Inclusive Practices

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated anti-Asian sentiment, fueled by misleading rumors and conspiracy theories such as the labels "Chinese Virus" and "Wuhan Virus." These narratives have contributed to a surge in hate crimes against Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities, with tragic incidents like the Atlanta shooting highlighting the severity of the issue. In response, the AAPI community has actively sought opportunities to foster mutual understanding through language, culture, and education. This paper presents a Chinese language program at a public research institution in a Southern U.S. state that integrates AAPI-inclusive practices into its curriculum. These practices helped raise awareness of cultural understanding of diversity and offered practical approaches. As an example, this paper provides insights into promoting dialogue on campus and within surrounding communities through collaborative learning using local resources; it facilitated mutual understanding and advocated social inclusion to combat anti-Asian discrimination.

Keywords: **AAPI inclusive practice, intercultural communication, cultural diversity, language learning for cross culture-awareness.**

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a surge in anti-Asian hate, especially through misleading rumors and conspiracy theories, such as the "Chinese Virus" and the "Wuhan" virus. Asian hate crimes against the AAPI (Karandikar, Munshi & Cho, 2024), like the Atlanta shooting, highlight the severity of the issue negatively affecting Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities (Fan et al., 2022). Stop Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Hate, a U.S. alliance founded in March 2020, has been identified as one of the primary aggregators of anti-Asian hate. Stop AAPI Hate detected 10905 hate events since March 19, 2020, and approximately 60% of the incidents occurred in public locations, including public streets and shops (Jeung et al., 2022). Incident reports were received from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, with 54.6% of the reports from California and New York. Race was cited as the critical reason for discrimination. Discrimination against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders is primarily verbal harassment (63.7%) and shunning (16.5%), with physical assault (13.7%) being the third largest category. Civil rights violations account for 11.0% of incidents, and online harassment accounts for 8.3%. (Yellow Horse et al., n.d.). The data acquired through the Stop AAPI Hate web portal is self-reported and could be biased. However, comprehensive nationwide research of Asian Americans and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders by Ta Park and colleagues indicated that 60.7% reported discrimination happened during COVID-19 (Park et al., 2022).

In higher education settings, many young adult Asian American learners face unwanted pressure from the model minority stereotype and associated psychological distress when they fail to match its expectations (Yip et al., 2021). Research shows that students with Asian heritage, such as Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, to name a few, are strongly influenced by Confucianism, which has shaped their education and socialization (Sun, 2013). These students are generally portrayed as quiet and hard-working, often listening attentively to the lectures, learning from the teacher, and following their instructions carefully (Sun et al., 2019). However, Asian American students are often identified as being similar in culture and learning achievement, leading to many students not receiving the relevant services and help they need (Hsieh & Kim, 2020). This stereotype prevents many Asian Americans from engaging in social activity and is often overlooked, impacting their social presence and quality of life (Tran & Curtin, 2017).

Languages and cultures are essential for socialization, yet many Asian languages and cultures are not well-studied among learners. Thus, they can be barriers that lead to people's misunderstanding, which can be soil for developing wrong assumptions and conclusions. Therefore, second language learning and cultural understanding become critical to enhancing mutual understanding for social inclusion and appreciation. Yet, there is a lack of studies in literature. Thus, seeking alternative ways to innovatively design language learning and cultural applications for both American and Asian American learners to participate actively in and outside of class activities has become a critical goal of Chinese language education, especially in the social context of Asian Hate.

To address these challenges and promote an inclusive learning environment, the Chinese program at a public research institution in a Southern State of the US incorporates the AAPI inclusive practices into the course curriculum to promote awareness of anti-Asian discrimination and encourage social and cultural activities through conversation to promote mutual understanding and social inclusion. These practices aim to create an inclusive and culturally sensitive learning

environment, fostering a deeper understanding of the language and culture of people from the AAPI community that helps reduce discrimination or stereotypes towards them. This paper presents an example using alternative teaching activities and incorporating AAPI inclusive practices to close the relationship between language learning and cultural understanding in teaching Chinese as a second language (CSL) in higher education, particularly in light of rising anti-AAPI sentiment. It demonstrates how purposeful language learning can enhance cross-cultural communication skills, ultimately fostering greater intercultural awareness and competency.

Design of Class Activities

AAPI Inclusive Practices in Chinese Class

AAPI inclusive practices were implemented in the Chinese program at a public research institution in a Southern State of the US, aiming to help students explore the Chinese Language and Culture fostering community understanding of the culturally rich diversity. The practices were integrated into the Elementary Chinese class. Elementary Chinese is a two-semester Mandarin Chinese course designed to introduce beginners to the foundational skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in Chinese while also fostering an understanding of Chinese culture in real life. Therefore, the courses included projects that motivate students to learn from and use their language skills for communicating, connecting, collaborating, and engaging the on-campus and local community, presenting the language and culture of the AAPI community and people.

Museum as a Cultural Source for Learning

Collaborated with a local Museum of Arts, a learning activity and project was designed and developed for the course -- the *Global Asias* Presentation. Global Asias exhibitions at the museum feature Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art from the collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and his family foundation. The exhibition presents the work of sixteen artists of Asian descent who draw on a vast array of motifs, techniques, and cultural motivations to construct distinct Asias in a modern global environment. Artists represented in the exhibition include Kwang-Yun Chun, Ding Q. Le, Jun Kaneko, Hung Liu, Takashi Murakami, Do Hu Suh, and Barbara Takenaga.

> **The exhibition presents the work of sixteen artists of Asian descent who draw on a vast array of motifs, techniques, and cultural motivations to construct distinct Asias in a modern global environment.**

Before visiting the museum in person, students were required to take a self-directed learning approach by exploring the Museum website and learning about "Global Asias" and its meaning. The exhibition did not focus on geographical location. Therefore, it inspired learners to think broadly about how "Asia" has historically acted as an imaginative icon across the globe.

During the museum visit, the docent introduced the students to the art collection and available general resources. The exhibition is divided into three thematic sessions. "*Exuberant*

Forms" showcases abstract art that challenges traditional views, while "*Moving Stories*" explores migration experiences in Asia and beyond. "*Asia Reinvented*" showcases works that adapt traditional Asian art styles to contemporary and cosmopolitan influences, challenging the canonical narrative of abstraction. After the docent introduced the art pieces, the students had the opportunity to explore freely and find pieces that interested them and take notes for their presentation assignment. The instructor reminded the students to pay attention to and make connections between the exhibition piece and the content discussed in class.

Cultural Poster Presentation at International Coffee House

Partnering with the International House on campus, a poster presentation project was designed for a community-based learning experience for this course. This activity selected time (during Chinese New Year) and environment (International House), whose mission is to educate, engage, and support all students in engaging in and contributing to global learning and cultural diversity. This experiential learning activity was designed to help students apply language skills and deepen their understanding of Chinese culture and their ability to communicate effectively with audiences in real-time situations.

This learning activity was a four-week project to enhance students' understanding of both the linguistic components and Chinese culture awareness. In week one, the instructor provided instructions on the assignment and explained the timeline, expectations, and examples of previous successful posters. A list of possible topics was provided to guide the students' research. Students were asked to form small groups of three or four members freely. In week two, each group selected a topic of their preference. Students researched their chosen subject and gathered data from at least ten resources to bring to the next class. In the third week, each group shared their findings, received classmates' feedback, and started designing their posters. During this week, they would work on a draft that includes a title, key sentences in both Chinese and English, pictures, and charts to help visually present their content. In the fourth week, students are asked to focus on rehearsing their presentations, particularly on fluency, accuracy, and the complexity of the language used. Then, the poster was finalized, and responses were prepared for possible questions the audience may ask based on the content they presented. On the presentation day, students set up booths to present their posters to attendees. They introduced their topic, answered questions from the audience, and taught two Chinese words related to the Chinese New Year.

Participants

The class had twenty-eight students who participated in the survey at the end of class. Among these students were twenty-seven undergraduate students and one graduate student. 61% of students have not studied Chinese before college, while 39% have previously learned Chinese and are placed in Elementary Chinese Classes. They came from various majors, including astrology, business management, geology, linguistics, psychology, supply chain, biology, and computer science. Prior to joining the class, 71% reported they had limited knowledge of Asian culture, particularly Chinese culture, 10.7% mentioned they had no knowledge at all, and 17.9% felt they possessed abundant knowledge. In terms of language proficiency, before joining the class, 46.4% could not speak Chinese at all, 42.9% rated themselves as novices, and others' self-rating was intermediate or advanced.

Learning Outcomes and Reflection

Survey Design

To better understand how the learning activities applied work, the instructor developed a survey questionnaire to collect student learning feedback and evaluate participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of AAPI inclusive practice in fostering cultural understanding, language acquisition, and communication skills, which includes open-ended questions at the end of the semester of the class offered. In so doing, it explores the important connections between language learning and cultural understanding, with an emphasis on cross-cultural awareness and intercultural competency applied in the real world. The first four questions are multiple-choice (see below the four questions in the four figures). Respondents are asked to choose their agreement on a five-point scale from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree." The final two open-ended questions aim to understand these projects' broader experiences and implications. They inquire about how these projects may contribute to the participants' learning and understanding of the language they study, its associated culture, and improved community communication.

Open-ended questions concerning students' experiences and additional feelings were organized based on coding. The initial coding process involved identifying the key concepts and ideas in the students' responses. Initial codes such as "cultural background," "learning opportunities," "communication," "AAPI groups," "language acquisition," and "development" are used. "Coding is taking transcribed text data and making sense of them." (Creswell & Baez, 2020, p.159). Below are the results from the survey and open-ended questions.

The survey results of the five-scale questions showed strong positive responses from participants. In the museum presentation assignment, students presented their favorite art piece and compared the similarities and differences between the Global Asian and Western arts. Some Asian heritage students also discussed their connections between the art piece and historical events or periods. This activity attempted to help learners through pre-reading, site visits, and their own research

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The museum visit project has received positive feedback, with 44.4% of respondents strongly agreeing and 33.3% agreeing on its role in deepening cultural understanding. In terms of language acquisition, the museum visiting projects received more moderate responses, with 17.9% of respondents strongly agreeing and 39.3% agreeing. This suggests that students perceive the museum visit as having less impact on language learning than the cultural presentation.

Students from the Elementary Chinese Class collaborated with the International House to organize the International Coffee event. This gathering offered a relaxed setting for all students, staff, faculty, and visiting scholars on campus to come together and enjoy Asian-style refreshments while watching and listening to poster presentations. The event took place during the Chinese New Year, showcasing Chinese traditions, costumes, cuisine, and tattoos in Chinese and English for the campus community to experience, making the learning more interactive and fun. Around 200 students actively took part in this engaging and culturally enriching event.

All participants believe the New Year Presentation fosters a deep understanding and appreciation of Asian Cultures. Specifically, 44.4% of participants "strongly agree," and "55.6% "agree" with this statement. Similarly, when asked if participating in the cultural presentation aids 64.3% chose "agree."

Do you agree that the cultural presentation project will contribute to fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of Asian cultures?
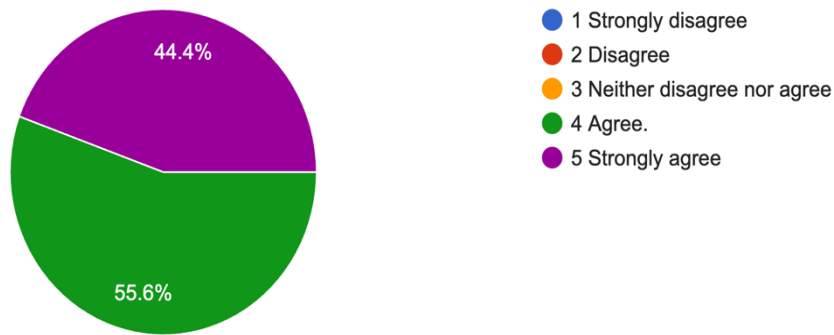27 responses

- ● 1 Strongly disagree
- ● 2 Disagree
- ● 3 Neither disagree nor agree
- ● 4 Agree.
- ● 5 Strongly agree

44.4%

55.6%

Figure 1

Do you agree that participating in the cultural presentation project will aid in your language acquisition of Chinese?
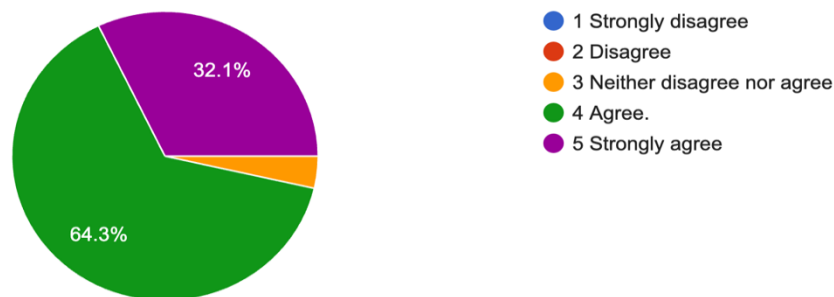28 responses

- ● 1 Strongly disagree
- ● 2 Disagree
- ● 3 Neither disagree nor agree
- ● 4 Agree.
- ● 5 Strongly agree

32.1%

64.3%

Figure 2

Do you agree that participating in museum visiting project will aid in your language acquisition of Chinese?
28 responses

- 1. Strongly disagree
- 2. Disagree
- 3 Neither disagree nor agree
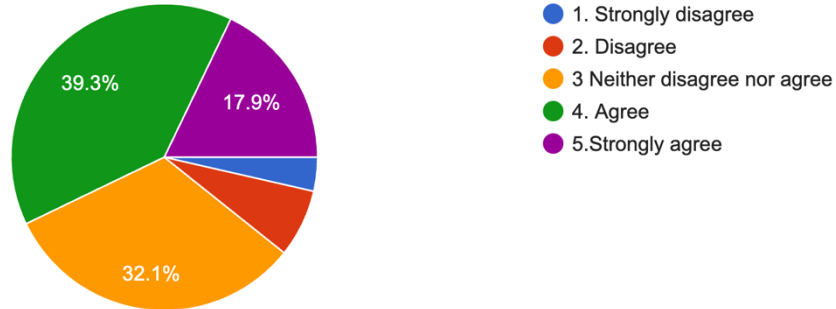- 4. Agree
- 5.Strongly agree

Figure 3

Do you agree that the museum visiting project will contribute to fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of Asian cultures?
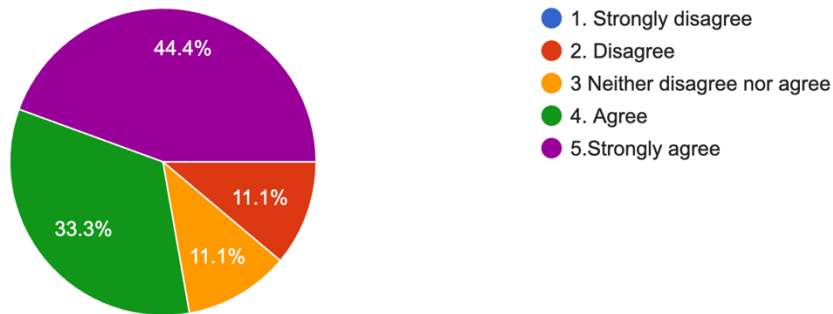27 responses

- 1. Strongly disagree
- 2. Disagree
- 3 Neither disagree nor agree
- 4. Agree
- 5.Strongly agree

Figure 4

The analysis of open-ended questions revealed the following main themes, which uncovered interesting findings about how AAPI inclusive practices may facilitate cross-cultural language learning, cultural awareness, and intercultural communication.

Cross-Culture Awareness and Appreciation

The example of applying the AAPI-inclusive projects to the class helped enhance students' understanding and appreciation of Asian cultures, especially the cultural significance, traditions, and historical facts. Many students noted that these projects deepened their cultural awareness; one participant stated, "*because they provide information on a cultural background one might have no prior experience with.*" Another student commented, "*It allows us to learn more about the culture.*" One student observed that connecting language and culture fosters an interest in learning, "*I think it helps keep you interested in learning Chinese and is a good way to learn new vocabulary.*" The engagement sparked curiosity and appreciation; other participants commented similarly, "*[the] culture of different people than your own is very interesting and important.*"

These learning activities echo the literature. Numerous studies emphasize the critical role of cross-cultural awareness in foreign language education. Language and culture are closely connected and impact each other, as language reflects culture while culture influences language (Hu, 2001). Language learning aims to protect cultural, ethnic, or religious practices and values or encourage diversity to provide opinions and enrich human existence (Mishra & Kumar, 2014). It recognizes post-immigrant groups and their differentiation dimensions, promoting a demand for compensatory subsidies to ensure choices for marginalized groups. Language learners must have a cultural understanding because every language reflects numerous civilizations. Cultural awareness and appreciation are a recognition of equality between different cultures. Individuals have a positive interest in cultural similarities and differences. It helps the learner develop an open mind and increase cultural empathy and understanding. Therefore, to create cross-cultural awareness and appreciation, instructors must incorporate cross-cultural components into the curriculum and encourage students to apply their knowledge to the real world (Shemshadsara, 2012).

Development of Intercultural Communication Skills

Human relationships and attitudes impact intercultural interaction. In such cases, museums provide valuable cultural and social resources for foreign language teaching and learning, as they share many commonalities. Museums, in specific ways, display culture explicitly. They relate to and extend cultural components and are particularly relevant to life experiences (Wilson, 2012). AAPI-inclusive projects improve participants' communication skills across cultures, including understanding cultural norms, seeking topics for engaging conversation, and using relevant vocabulary. One student provided an example to the questionnaire questions, "*Yes, because we have to learn how to speak new vocabulary,*" emphasizing the importance of extending their precise expression by choosing and using vocabulary for cultural engagement to deepen the conversations. Another participant responded regarding the benefit of the learning project, "*It will help improve communication with AAPI groups because you can use these projects to spark conversation with people.*" This highlights the possibility of fostering meaningful

> **Museums, in specific ways, display culture explicitly.**

dialogues using what they learn and continuously learning. Additionally, a student reflected, "*I think being knowledgeable about the culture makes you more informed when speaking to people in AAPI groups and gives you things to talk about*," emphasizing that cultural knowledge enhances both language competence and intercultural communication.

Indeed, intercultural communication and interpretation skills determine the attitude toward gaining cultural awareness and knowledge. Ratnasari (2018) mentioned that foreign language learning is not only about grammar or vocabulary but also about the real-life skills necessary to communicate effectively to avoid misunderstanding others and being misunderstood by others. Thus, developing intercultural communication in the context of global learning and cultural competency skills should be integrated into the second language education curriculum (Aguilar, 2007). Based on the ACTFL standards and the 2007 MLA reports, teaching culture has been a priority, and this paper adds to the literature by advocating that educators must continue to seek innovative approaches to teach the culture and fulfill the goals of "comparisons" and connections (Sederberg, 2013).

Motivation and Engagement in Learning

Motivation and engagement are crucial for students' success in learning. Academic motivation refers to the inner force for continuing the learning process, and effective instructors prioritize raising these behaviors. For example, requiring students to self-research and make conclusions can be a motivational force for deep learning. As one student indicated in response to the questions about their effort in research for the project, "*Yes, creating the presentations requires lots of research*." Further, engagement describes an individual's active, persistent, and focused interactions with the learning environment (Peng, 2021). Providing a learning environment that facilitates such interactions helps engage active learning, as a student echoed, "*Yes, it allows me to learn [and] to be able to communicate with them better*," This implied that a learning environment purposefully established and designed can be critical for engaging and meaningful learning and application.

Throughout the class, the instructor observed that many students of Asian heritage were motivated to play an active role in the projects. They actively assisted in finding resources, shared their personal experiences during group presentations, and connected their travel experiences in Asia to discussions during museum visits. Other Non Asian heritage students also felt it beneficial to learn from them. One student said, "*I think it helps keep you interested in learning Chinese, and it is a good way to learn new vocabulary*." These interactions naturally establish a communication bridge, attitude of willingness to learn, and appreciative inquiry of learning from cross-cultural experiences. Learners are motivated for new discussions and feel encouraged to learn among all students, sharing their differences and similarities, which helps reduce the stereotype of Asian students being uniform.

Practical Application and Real-World Skills

One primary goal of second language learning is preparing students to apply their knowledge in real-world circumstances. Integrating real-life scenario practice into the curriculum is one of the tasks instructors use. In the Chinese New Year Presentation

project, designing a poster puts students in a "hands-on, problem-focused activity which encourages relation of knowledge to a specific question of interest and situates demonstration of comprehension" (Bracher et al., 1998, p.522). One student noted, "*I think that it helps create the context needed to fully understand why AAPI groups might see the world differently from, for example, Europeans might*". Reflecting on the cultural insights gained from the projects deepens their thoughts, leading to conscious reflection and critical thinking.

One great finding was that the presenters found the poster presentation less stressful, as it was more informal than conventional and allowed a two-way transmission of information (Lane, 2001). The poster presentation involved students using the target language in real-life situations while deeply exploring the culture and traditions. When asked about positive learning experiences, one commented, "*I think they do because learning new things always opens up new doors.*" Similar responses like this indicated an appreciation for the cultural context brought by the projects and a desire for more language learning and application.

Students gain knowledge through in-classroom learning and real-world applications. They are encouraged to explore differences when learning and understanding cultural diversity independently. In practice, we also noticed that students' preferences, feelings, or expressions should be listened to and should provide a choice of what and how to do it (Pietilä, 2014), which presents the essence of personal interests and active learning for language application in the real world. For instance, students can decide which practices to engage in and which knowledge to apply. These were reflected in the students' poster presentation. Teachers then guide the practice and ensure that resources are available, and misunderstandings are removed and avoided.

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Conclusion and Limitations

AAPI inclusive practices raise questions about identity, ethnicity, socialization, and other critical issues. The AAPI Inclusive Practice projects have been initiated to provide a platform for Chinese language learners to engage in social communication and express their thoughts on language and culture specific. These learning projects aimed to create a more inclusive and empathetic learning community and explore the potential of using creative expression to empower marginalized communities and reduce social biases. As this is a new initiative, we understand even if this is only 28 participants across three sessions in the Elementary Chinese Class, it is promising to see how this approach can be applied in the future, including a larger and more diverse group of participants and utilizing other research methods to gain a more in-depth understanding of the student's experiences. As a concluding remark, in this practice example, we wanted to illustrate alternative ways to integrate our learners' learning into resources around us and engage them in daily life for enhanced cultural understanding and communication among learners who speak different languages.

Implications

AAPI Inclusive Practices is assuring in teaching and learning foreign languages in a given social context, as shown in this case. Following we present some implications. First, it needs to be more integrated into a foreign language curriculum, focusing on cultural awareness and eliminating biases. However, contemporary education often fails to acknowledge when culturally and racially diverse groups face discrimination from societal attitudes. Therefore, people must examine, understand, and appreciate cultural differences to change the mindset of cultural ethnocentric, discrimination, and presumption-orientated biases. Historically, nurturing diversity requires making multicultural education a process of action (Gomez, 1991). Still, programs must actively seek alternatives for cultural learning activities to benefit learners, especially in the context of AAPI, which is constantly under attack.

Second, incorporating global learning and cultural competency into the academic environment is crucial. Instructors should cultivate multicultural motivation that is aligned with social justice needs and relate it to their own experiences. This will help create a conducive learning environment that supports students and uses various approaches to motivate students to apply their knowledge to real-life situations.

Third, engaging the community in the course curriculum development is also essential for foreign language educators. Instructors can provide students with necessary resources, collaborate with community partners, share knowledge, and demonstrate empathy while acknowledging differences in cultural backgrounds and life experiences.

Fourth, cultural awareness is vital for developing an appreciative mindset towards multiculturalism and open-mindedness in and beyond the classroom (Stroganova et al., 2019). This leads to greater tolerance, especially when addressing social issues among different cultural groups. Speaking different languages, understanding other cultures, and being open to new ways of seeing the world are integral to effective communication in this borderless world. Kourova and Modianos (2013) emphasized that globalization and technological advancements are transforming education. Modern language classes must also consider and incorporate a broader cultural fabric beyond just language learning, as language expresses the meaning of its culture. They complement each other.

Additionally, there are implications beyond teaching foreign languages. This practical example of applying AAPI inclusive practice for teaching and learning indicates that integrating real-life cultural perspectives and locally available experiential learning and practice resources can reduce misunderstanding and strengthen cross-cultural understanding. These projects could also be applied to other disciplines to enhance learning experiences, engage learners in intercultural communication, and promote mutual understanding and global learning. This is especially relevant for international students on campus as great resources, as the US is the leading host country for adult and higher education international students. Promoting global awareness is a crucial aspect of the country's internationalization strategy. It enhances learners' interest and motivation to explore diverse cultures, fostering a more inclusive environment.

Policymakers should also consider utilizing cultural resources on campus to facilitate faculty and staff learning more about different cultures, languages, traditions, and ways of life. While the findings are limited, they can offer insights for administrators to create training programs for faculty, staff, and graduate students, professional development, and social events, promoting a campus culture that values diversity, access, and inclusion. In the context of AAPI, everyone should have the opportunity to learn from and support one another. The broader community can also benefit from mutual understanding and collaboration with educational institutions, leading to more productive community development for social inclusion.

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