

Teaching Immigration-Themed Literature: A Resource for Cultural and Language Learning

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Abstract: Demographic shifts among Asian American communities in the United States, including Chinese Americans, provide an important context for examining how Chinese language education addresses learners' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This study explores pedagogical possibilities for Chinese language and culture teaching through a review of approaches to teaching immigration-themed literature in U.S. undergraduate education. Drawing on existing scholarship, this review examines key pedagogical considerations in teaching immigration-themed literature. It considers how immigrant narratives can support language learning while encouraging students to explore cultural identities and immigrant experiences. The review also offers pedagogical suggestions for world language educators interested in connecting language teaching with cultural understanding and identity development.

Keywords: Chinese American; Heritage language learning; Immigrant-themed literature; Chinese as a world language (CWL); Literature teaching; Cultural identities

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1. Introduction

According to the Pew Research Center ^[1], the Asian American population grew from 11.9 million in 2000 to 24.8 million in 2023, with roots in more than two dozen countries; Chinese Americans, at 5.5 million, are the largest origin group. As Ruiz et al. ^[2] observe, many Asian Americans are immigrants building their lives in the United States while maintaining connections to their countries of origin. Meanwhile, a growing U.S.-born generation navigates its own connections to familial heritage and experiences growing up in the United States. This demographic picture grounds my interest in how Chinese language teaching can serve both immigrant and U.S.-born learners.

When I began my doctoral studies, I worked as a teaching assistant for undergraduate Chinese courses for two years. That experience left me with a practical question: How can college-level Chinese teaching spark and sustain students' interest? During those years, I also hosted a Chinese Language and Culture Table (CLCT), an informal gathering where students practiced Chinese and shared stories, including immigration

stories. These experiences led me to consider immigration-themed literature as a way to connect language learning with students' experiences of culture and identity. Though I now teach academic writing, this review grows out of that earlier inquiry. As Lowery ^[3] notes, immigration has long been part of American history, yet "[i]n the struggle to ascertain the 'American dream,' some immigrants' stories get told, and others do not" (p. 1). This reminds me that representation is never neutral: we must ask whose stories are told and how they are represented. Recent scholarship continues to address these questions. For example, Cun ^[4] examines how languages, cultures, and identities are represented in picture books portraying refugee stories. Drawing on these concerns, this review addresses two questions: (1) How might immigration-themed literature support language learning, cultural understanding, and identity exploration in undergraduate Chinese language education? (2) What pedagogical practices can educators draw on to engage students with immigration-themed literature?

With these questions in mind, this review examines studies of immigration-themed literature across different educational contexts and considers their relevance to undergraduate Chinese language teaching. It also explores how these approaches might support Chinese American students in exploring their cultural identities and connections to heritage language and culture. The paper first presents the theoretical framework and review methods, followed by nine pedagogical practices identified in the literature. It then discusses implications for heritage culture, identity, and academic achievement, and concludes with gaps in the existing research and directions for future work.

2. Conceptual framework

This literature review is primarily guided by critical literacy theory. Critical literacy provides a perspective for examining how language, culture, identity, and power are represented in literature ^[5]. Critical literacy is not simply an approach to teaching literacy but a broader perspective for examining texts, social practices, and relations of power. This lens keeps me asking whose stories get told, whose voices are missing, and whether immigration-themed literature pushes students to question cultural representations and social inequality. It also guides my review of text selection, critical reading practices, and opportunities for inquiry and reflection.

Hall's ^[6] work on representation also informs this review. For Hall, representation does not mirror reality so much as produce meaning through language and other signifying practices. In immigration-themed literature, the ways immigrants and their cultural identities are portrayed may shape how readers understand their cultures, experiences, and sense of belonging. Hall's perspective also informs the examination of how students interpret and question these representations through reading. The review also draws on culturally responsive teaching ^[7], which views students' cultural knowledge and experiences as resources for teaching and learning. In this review, this perspective helps examine how educators select literature that reflects diverse cultural experiences, connect literary discussions to students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and create opportunities for exploring heritage language and cultural identity.

3. Method

This review draws on journal articles, book chapters, and other relevant scholarship identified through searches of Google Scholar and ERIC. Most of the selected studies were published between 2010 and 2026, with an emphasis on recent research. Some earlier works were also included because of their relevance to

the topic. Studies were selected for their relevance to the teaching of immigration-themed literature, cultural identity, and language learning. Since relatively few studies focus specifically on teaching immigration-themed literature in undergraduate Chinese language education, the review also includes relevant research from other language teaching contexts and educational levels.

The studies were read and compared, with attention to the pedagogical approaches discussed across the literature. This process informed the identification of nine pedagogical practices that may be useful for teaching immigration-themed literature. My experience teaching undergraduate Chinese also informed my interpretation of the literature.

4. Pedagogical possibilities for teaching immigration-themed literature

4.1. Critical text selection: Centering authentic immigrant voices

Selecting immigration-themed texts involves considering a range of genres, including excerpts, short stories, films, poetry, graphic novels, and nonfiction. Durand et al.^[8] suggest using award-winning and honor lists as a starting point for selecting immigration-themed young adult literature, particularly when teachers cannot read every available book. However, they caution that “[a]ward-winning and honor book collections raise additional concerns related to diversity and equity in youth literature” (p. 667). They also encourage teachers to consider authors’ backgrounds and relationships to immigration and to engage students in thinking critically about authorship (p. 667). Visual narratives offer another way to approach text selection.

Across the literature, several considerations for text selection emerge: using award lists while questioning their diversity, considering authors’ backgrounds and relationships to immigration, choosing works that represent immigrants’ home languages and cultures, and incorporating visual texts to encourage discussions of race and identity. Botelho and Marion^[9] identify three types of multilingual texts, fully translated, dual language, and translanguaging texts, that offer different ways of engaging readers with multilingual experiences. Translanguaging texts, in particular, allow students to encounter multilingual practices through characters’ everyday language use. Cun^[4] further highlights the importance of critical text selection by examining how picture books portraying refugee stories may represent or misrepresent languages, cultures, and identities. These studies suggest that immigration-themed literature can be introduced at different stages of world language education, rather than being reserved for advanced learners.

4.2. Critical content analysis and paratextual analysis

Critical content analysis offers a way to examine how immigrants and their experiences are represented in literature. Allen^[10] argues that rising hate crimes against immigrants have heightened attention to children’s literature with immigration themes as a means of opening dialogue with students. Concerns about anti-Asian racism since the COVID-19 pandemic have made these questions particularly relevant. Rodriguez and Braden^[11] examined 13 children’s picture books (2010–2016) depicting Latinx immigration using Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit), with a focus on analyzing representation. More recently, Wee et al.^[12] analyzed how racism and microaggressions against East Asian and Asian Americans are portrayed in children’s picture books, further demonstrating the value of critical content analysis in examining racial representations and stereotypes. These studies suggest that examining how immigrants are portrayed is an important part of teaching immigration-themed literature.

Paratextual analysis extends this examination beyond the stories themselves. Durand et al. (2021) describe

paratextual analysis of immigration-themed young adult books, including front and back covers, acknowledgments, author notes, interviews, and reviewer comments ^[8]. Their approach raises two central questions: how an author's positionality can be understood and what discourses about immigration are reflected in these materials (pp. 667–669). Attending to paratexts matters because ideologies about immigration are not confined to the stories themselves; they also circulate through the materials around them. Examining these connections helps reveal how immigration narratives are constructed and framed for readers. From a critical literacy perspective, both critical content analysis and paratextual analysis provide ways for educators to evaluate literary representations and engage students in questioning the meanings and ideologies embedded in texts.

4.3. Inquiry and reflection: Centering students' meaning-making

Boatright ^[13] emphasizes the importance of inquiry and reflection in teaching immigration-themed literature, calling on educators to “critique immigrant experiences as they are portrayed in works of literature, especially because literature has the potential to ignite dialogue, force questions, and foster community building in an atmosphere of inquiry and reflection” (p. 469). In the classroom, inquiry may involve students raising questions about characters' choices and connecting these questions to their own experiences. Reflection, through journals or classroom discussions, allows students to reconsider their initial interpretations and develop their own understandings of the stories. Adu-Gyamfi et al. ^[14] illustrate this approach in an elementary classroom, where students used open discussions, journaling, and collaborative theme generation to explore immigration picture books, revising their initial responses as they engaged with questions about representation and whose stories are told.

Inquiry and reflection are also important for teachers. Coulter et al. ^[15] show how narrative research methods can serve as pedagogical strategies in preservice teacher education, helping teachers reflect on, question, and learn from their experiences. Their discussion also emphasizes the need to question the truth claims of teacher narratives and consider multiple critical interpretations. For immigration-themed literature teaching, inquiry and reflection can therefore create opportunities for both students and teachers to question assumptions, consider different perspectives, and develop more critical understandings of immigrant experiences.

4.4. Reading literary dialogue: Questioning language ideologies

Language choices in immigration-themed literature offer opportunities for students to examine how speakers are perceived and valued. In classroom discussions, teachers can guide students to consider who speaks and who remains silent, which languages or varieties characters use, and how particular ways of speaking are represented as standard or different. These questions draw attention to the relationship between language, identity, and power. Stamou ^[16] brings critical discourse analysis (CDA) into conversation with language ideology research, suggesting that close attention to language can reveal not only how social inequalities are reproduced through discourse but also how language itself becomes a basis for inequality (p. 80).

This perspective is particularly relevant to heritage language learners, whose language practices may be judged against narrow ideas of what counts as correct or authentic. In their analysis of world language teacher preparation textbooks, Burns and Quan ^[17] identify three recurring ideologies, authenticity, presumed learner populations, and standard language, that can marginalize heritage language learners and their language varieties. Although their study focuses on teacher education rather than literature teaching, it raises questions relevant to classroom reading: Whose language is considered legitimate? What assumptions are made about

different speakers? How do these judgments influence characters' experiences of identity and belonging? Exploring these questions through immigration-themed literature may help students develop critical language awareness while connecting literary interpretation with broader issues of language and identity.

4.5. Developing intercultural competence through immigration-themed literature

Developing intercultural competence is an important goal of world language education. Immigration-themed literature offers opportunities for students to explore cultural differences, question assumptions, and understand experiences beyond their own. Sørensen and Rusminah^[18] discuss how picture books addressing migration, identity, and power relations can support intercultural learning. Although their work focuses on younger learners, it offers insights relevant to undergraduate language teaching. Byram's^[19] model of intercultural communicative competence provides a useful perspective for understanding this process, emphasizing openness toward cultural differences, knowledge of one's own and other cultures, skills of interpreting and relating cultural experiences, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Through reading immigration-themed literature, students may develop these capacities by examining characters' experiences and reflecting on their own cultural perspectives.

Intercultural learning can also extend beyond classroom reading and discussion. Elola and Oskoz^[20] explore how blogs and online journals can support intercultural communication in foreign language learning by allowing students to share reflections, photographs, and experiences while interacting with others. These approaches offer possibilities for literature teaching, where students might use reflective journals or digital discussions to respond to immigrant narratives, compare cultural experiences, and consider different perspectives. In undergraduate Chinese language classrooms, such activities may help students connect language practice with intercultural understanding while developing greater awareness of how language, culture, and identity shape people's experiences.

4.6. Exploring cultural borders through immigration-themed literature

Immigration-themed literature offers opportunities for students to explore how cultural borders are constructed and how they shape people's experiences of identity and belonging. Giroux^[21] introduces border pedagogy as a way of questioning the cultural and political boundaries that shape knowledge and power. In *Border Crossings*, he encourages students to "engage knowledge as border-crossers, as people moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power"^[22] (p. 22). These borders are not simply physical but are also culturally and historically constructed^[22] (p. 21). In teaching immigration-themed literature, this perspective can help students examine how characters navigate cultural differences, negotiate their identities, and challenge the boundaries that separate individuals and communities.

Becnel and Moeller^[23] suggest that educators and librarians collaborate in selecting and teaching graphic novels featuring first-generation immigrants. They argue that these narratives can challenge simplified media representations of immigrants and encourage young readers to recognize the power dynamics involved in immigration experiences (p. 29). Their approach offers possibilities for bringing discussions of cultural borders into the language classroom. Through reading and discussing immigrant narratives, students can consider how cultural boundaries shape characters' experiences while reflecting on the boundaries they encounter or observe in their own communities. Such discussions may help students connect literary texts with broader questions of cultural identity, power, and belonging.

4.7. Exploring cultural identities through immigration-themed literature

Language plays an important role in shaping cultural identity, which is not simply inherited but continuously negotiated through social experiences^[24]. As Bae^[25] suggests, people's engagement with particular languages is influenced by the value they attach to them. Some immigrant students may have limited knowledge of their heritage languages while growing up primarily speaking English. For Chinese American students, questions of cultural identity may involve negotiating family expectations, heritage language, and a sense of belonging in American society. Ruiz et al.^[2] describe how Asian Americans navigate cultural differences between generations and social pressures to fit in. One participant expressed this tension by explaining, "I have to show that I am American, [that] I can speak English fluently"^[2]. Such experiences illustrate how language and cultural identity are shaped by social expectations and the desire for acceptance.

Immigration-themed literature offers opportunities for students to explore these questions through the experiences of literary characters. Reading immigrant narratives can encourage students to consider how language, family histories, and cultural expectations shape identity and belonging. Rovira^[26] raises questions about the relationship between language and identity, including whether maintaining one's home language should be recognized as a human right (p. 64). Teachers might begin by inviting students to reflect on questions of names, family histories, and cultural backgrounds, considering how these aspects of identity carry different meanings across cultural contexts. Through reading, discussion, and reflection, students can examine how identities are formed and negotiated while developing a deeper understanding of their own and others' linguistic and cultural experiences.

4.8. Storytelling and creative expression: Moving toward critical action

Storytelling offers students opportunities to express their perspectives and engage with immigration experiences through creative activities. Enciso^[27] describes a multi-voiced pedagogy involving poetic scripts, dramatic improvisation, and story-club meetings. Students transformed their words into poetic scripts and performed them in small groups as readers' theatre, allowing their shared opposition to bigotry to be heard (p. 37). In story-club meetings, they also discussed how to present their work to the school, including a hallway display combining poems, photographs, and world flags. These activities illustrate how poetry and performance can create space for students to express their feelings, share different perspectives, and bring their voices into a wider community.

Through dramatic improvisation, Enciso^[27] also demonstrates how classroom interactions can shift as students take on different roles as speakers and listeners (pp. 37–38). Such experiences suggest that storytelling can move beyond personal expression toward questioning prejudice and social inequalities. More recently, Hauber-Özer et al.^[28] extend this discussion to digital storytelling, examining how refugee adults created counter-narratives that challenged simplified representations of forced migrants. These approaches offer possibilities for teaching immigration-themed literature in undergraduate Chinese language classrooms, where students might respond to literary narratives through poetry, performance, or digital storytelling. Such activities may encourage students to connect language learning with cultural reflection while finding ways to express their perspectives on immigration, identity, and belonging.

4.9. Culturally relevant literature teaching: Supporting diverse learners

Culturally relevant pedagogy offers a way to connect immigration-themed literature with students' linguistic and cultural experiences. Ladson-Billings^[29] defines culturally relevant teaching as "pedagogy that empowers

students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 17–18). In literature classrooms, this means going beyond introducing immigrant stories as cultural information. Teachers can encourage students to draw on their own experiences, share different perspectives, and question assumptions about immigrants and their cultures. Classroom discussions can also provide opportunities for students to examine how their linguistic and cultural backgrounds influence their interpretations of literary texts.

Durden et al.^[30] describe culturally relevant pedagogy as involving relational, curricular, and ideological dimensions (pp. 223–224). Their example of “democratic meetings” in early childhood classrooms highlights the importance of allowing students to participate actively in classroom discussions (p. 226), an approach that may also inform teaching at the undergraduate level. More recently, Kim and Kwon^[31] examine how Asian American and Asian migrant teachers select children’s literature that addresses racism, stereotypes, and resistance while affirming students’ cultural identities and transnational connections. Their work suggests that culturally relevant literature teaching involves not only recognizing students’ cultural backgrounds but also creating opportunities to question dominant narratives and social inequalities. In undergraduate Chinese language classrooms, these approaches may help students connect literary reading with their cultural experiences while developing a deeper understanding of language, identity, and belonging.

5. Implications

The findings of this review suggest that immigration-themed literature can provide meaningful opportunities for students to explore the relationships among language, cultural identity, and belonging. For Chinese American and other heritage language learners, such literature may offer a space to reflect on their family histories, linguistic experiences, and connections to their cultural heritage. Lee^[32] examines the relationship between cultural identity and academic achievement among Chinese American and Korean American students, highlighting the importance of recognizing students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds in educational settings. Rather than assuming that students share the same cultural experiences or levels of heritage language proficiency, educators can use immigration-themed literature to create opportunities for students to explore different perspectives and reflect on their own identities. In undergraduate Chinese language classrooms, these approaches may help connect language learning with students’ lived experiences while encouraging critical reflection on cultural representation and belonging.

Lee^[32] also investigated whether achievement relates to students’ involvement in and awareness of their ancestral culture (p. 330), finding “a strong correlation between the students’ cultural interest/identity and their academic achievement” (p. 334). Yet only 38% of participants knew much about their history or culture, compared with 86% interested in learning more, suggesting Asian American students lack adequate exposure to Asian history and culture in and outside the home (p. 333) and need more resources to learn their culture.

More evidence shows strong associations between heritage language learning, cultural awareness, and cultural identity. Lee^[32] hypothesized that students with greater interest in their language and cultural identity achieved more, driven by motivation for diversified learning (p. 334). The literature thus suggests a relationship between heritage language learning and cultural identity, though these studies describe associations rather than proving that one causes the other. Lee^[32] also found that most Americans did not recognize Chinese or Korean culture as part of U.S. culture: the educational system gives students of different backgrounds too little space to have their languages and cultures recognized. More work is needed to increase

linguistic and cultural richness.

The road of immigration is paved with hardship, and re-finding identity mixes self-denial, affirmation, and re-affirmation. As Ruiz, Shao, and Shan ^[2] note, “language was a key aspect of identity for the participants,” tied to ethnic heritage. Rovira ^[26] writes that culture, shared values, customs, and histories strongly influence how a person behaves, thinks, and views the world (p. 66), and that “language is intrinsic to the expression of culture” and “a fundamental aspect of cultural identity” (p. 67). As Baez ^[33] puts it, “language not only creates the contours of identity, it also may set up the conditions for other kinds of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and not belonging, success and failure” (p. 126).

6. Conclusion

This literature review identifies nine pedagogical possibilities for teaching immigration-themed literature, highlighting how literary texts can connect language learning with questions of culture, identity, and power. Although some of these approaches are not unique to immigration-themed literature, they offer useful perspectives for world language educators seeking to engage students in critical reading, cultural inquiry, and reflection. Since much of the existing scholarship comes from K–12 education and other language teaching contexts, further attention is needed to understand how these approaches might be applied in undergraduate Chinese language classrooms.

One question that emerged from this review is why immigration-themed literature remains relatively underexplored in Chinese language education, particularly at the undergraduate level. Much of the scholarship reviewed focuses on picture books, graphic novels, and younger learners, although recent studies, such as Adu-Gyamfi et al. ^[14], continue to explore how immigration and refugee narratives can encourage critical classroom discussions. Further research is needed to examine how teaching immigration-themed literature might relate to Chinese American students’ cultural identities, engagement with heritage language, and motivation for language learning. Beyond pronunciation and grammar, literature offers opportunities to bring language learning into conversation with students’ cultural experiences and questions of identity and belonging. As Lee ^[32] suggests, educators should practice “accepting and supporting the students’ language and culture while allowing them the opportunity to experience diversity in thinking and practice” (p. 336). This perspective reminds us that language, literature, and culture are closely connected in world language education.

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