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Teachers as Curators: Curating Authentic Online Content for Beginning and Intermediate CFL Learners

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Abstract

An abundance of authentic materials is available online for language learning. To locate appropriate materials is nearly impossible for even the most motivated learners. This requires teachers to curate authentic online content to enhance and supplement learners' learning. Content curation is the process of collecting, organizing and displaying information. This article describes the procedure and strategies one may use in curating authentic content materials for Chinese language learning online. Teachers as curators need to collect the content with the consideration of difficulty level for different learners. In addition, they should put a lot of thoughts into content categorization based on the learners' language levels, interests, and their language skills they would like to practice so as to make it conveniently accessible to learners. Necessary pedagogical supports should be provided with the collection.

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Comments

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Teachers as Curators: Curating Authentic Online Content for Beginning and Intermediate CFL Learners

教师如何为初级和中级中文学习者策展网络中文语言学习内容

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English Abstract:

An abundance of authentic materials is available online for language learning. To locate appropriate materials is nearly impossible for even the most motivated learners. This requires teachers to curate authentic online content to enhance and supplement learners' learning. Content curation is the process of collecting, organizing and displaying information. This article describes the procedure and strategies one may use in curating authentic content materials for Chinese language learning online. Teachers as curators need to collect the content with the consideration of difficulty level for different learners. In addition, they should put a lot of thoughts into content categorization based on the learners' language levels, interests, and their language skills they would like to practice so as to make it conveniently accessible to learners. Necessary pedagogical supports should be provided with the collection.

中文摘要：

网上可用的中文教学真实语料极其丰富，但是即使最有动力的学生几乎不可能找到适合其需要的语料。这就需要中文教师扮演内容策展者的角色。内容策展是博物馆和图书馆常用的术语，它是收集，整理，展示相关主题内容的方法。本文作者探讨中文教师如何以网上真实中文语料策展来帮助初级和中级学生学习中文，并讨论策展工具问题。作者提出，网上真实语料策展需要考虑学生的语言水平，兴趣以及学生所要练习的语言技能的需要，从而使学生能够很方便地找到所需资料。作者还指出，作为策展者，教师应该为策展内容附加教学设计，使学习者更大程度受益。

This is the accepted manuscript of an article published as: **Zhang, S.** (2015). Teachers as curators: Curating authentic online content for beginning and intermediate CFL learners. *Journal of Chinese Teaching and Research in the U.S.*, 128-140.

Introduction

As we all know, there are tons of authentic materials in Chinese available on the Internet. As Xie (2014) stressed in calling for using the available materials on the Internet, "there is whatever you need on

the Internet.” Our students, if they are motivated enough, could all go online to find those authentic materials to improve their language skills. However, not all of them go online to seek appropriate supplemental materials actively, or able to identify such materials for their language learning. Furthermore, none of the beginning or intermediate Chinese-as-a-Foreign-Language (CFL) Learners is able to digest, not even understand five percent of the vast amount of authentic materials on the Internet. They could easily be overwhelmed or disoriented when they use websites written in Chinese (Zhang, 2006). It is nearly impossible for the beginning and intermediate CFL learners to utilize the vastly available authentic learning materials on the Internet on their own. Facing such rich resources online, it is a pity that few students could use them in their language learning.

To successfully find difficulty-level appropriate and engaging online authentic materials to use, a lot of time, skills and persistence are needed, especially for the beginning learners. Before we find out what skills are necessary and how to teach CFL learners those skills, CFL learners need external help so that the available authentic materials could be utilized to enhance their Chinese learning. To help them maximally utilize the vast authentic materials available on the Internet, we teachers need to play the role of curators and “curate” the online contents.

Curation is derived from the verb “to curate” from the Latin word “curare” which means “to take care.” Content curation is the process of collecting, organizing and displaying information relevant to a particular topic or area of interest (Harvey, 2010). Curatorial practice mainly happens in the field of museums and cultural heritage. It is also widely practiced in the library science field. Nowadays content curation is often done by librarians, scientists, historians, and scholars. More and more educators start to sift through the vast abundance of content on the Internet, select the most appropriate contents, and to share the curated content with their colleagues and students with Web tools such as Scoopit, Pinterest, etc. Scholars did research on how to use different web tools to curate content for specific themes (Arena, 2013).

This article was aimed at Chinese language teachers who are contemplating developing a collection of digital learning materials from the Internet for their students and those who are already doing this type of work but need more information or guidance on dealing with specific aspects of their projects. In this study, I would like to introduce my understanding of how to do content curation to help beginning and intermediate CFL learners use online authentic materials. I borrowed terms and concepts from the library science and applied language learning theories in authentic online content curatorial practice.

In the article, I first explained the rationale for doing curation for beginning and intermediate Chinese learners. Then I specified the possible goals and scope for the curation and described the curation procedures for the purpose of helping beginning and intermediate CFL learners. Following the goals and scope of curation, the principles in curating contents for language learners were discussed.

Rationale for Content Curation in Language Teaching

Importance of Using Authentic Materials in Language Learning

In the field of second and foreign language education, using authentic materials have been proved to be very crucial in enhancing students’ learning (Freeman & Holden, 1986; González, 1990; Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1989; Little & Singleton, 1991; Swaffar, 1985). Being exposed to a large amount of authentic materials creates a micro-native environment, which could speed up students’ acquisition of the target language and culture (González, 1990) and increase students’ awareness of the language variation. Using authentic materials gives students a purpose of learning the target language (Peacock 1997; Richard, 2001), as well as motivates students’ learning (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Clarke 1989; McGarry, 1995; Morrison, 1989; Peacock, 1997; Philips and Shettlesworth 1978). For example, a video clip of a talent show or TV news can draw students to what is happening in the native speakers’ daily life and what current affairs are affecting the native speakers’ life. They can also make them aware of the purpose of learning the language and might motivate them to learn the language to get to know the target language speakers’ life more.

In addition, using authentic materials expands students’ understanding of language uses and henceforth may help students develop pragmatic competence. Textbooks for beginning language learners

in general do not focus on the development of students' pragmatic competence, but on the basic use of the language, as reported in studies investigating textbooks introducing opening and closing (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mehan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1991; Grant & Starks, 2001; Scotton & Bernsten, 1988; Zhang, 2013). For example, “你好” (Nihao, Hello) is the only opening introduced in most of the textbooks for first year Chinese. In real life, multiple ways are used to greet people depending on the relationship between speakers and the time of day and so on. A collection of authentic materials showing how people greet each other under different circumstances would be able to expand their knowledge about appropriate use of the language and therefore improve their language skills.

Curating For Learners As Teachers' Duty

Given that using authentic materials is very beneficial for language learning, there are a great amount of authentic materials available online, and beginning and intermediate learners have big challenge to find useful and helpful online materials to help with their language learning, we as teachers would be failing in what our duty requires if we did not help students utilize the easily accessible authentic materials online in our language teaching. Teachers' help is especially important to the beginning and intermediate language learners. Language teachers should play an important role in helping students maximally utilize different online materials (Compton, 2009, p. 88; Doughty & Long, 2003; Ushida, 2005).

Questions and Concerns Surrounding Language Materials Curation

There have been many questions and concerns about selecting online materials for language learning use, such as how do we systematically select online materials and what criteria do we use in selecting those materials? To answer these questions, we need to approach the use of online authentic materials from a perspective similar with librarians curating digital contents for some topics. Teachers perform content curation practice as curators. This article will try to answer these questions.

Goals, Scope and Objectives for Online Authentic Chinese Materials Curation

To start any curation project, one should consider the goals and scope for the curation. Once the goals and scope are set, the criteria that are to be used for collecting content will be set.

Goals of Curation

All curatorial practice sets a goal at the beginning of the project, which drives the curation process. The goal of curation is to provide beginning and intermediate CFL learners an easy access to various authentic online materials of appropriate difficulty level. With these curated materials, learners could have free access to this body of materials via searching or limiting by level, theme, grammar points, regions, and so on. The collection will grow by adding newly published online materials as time goes on.

Scope of Collection

In the field of library and information technology, scope of collection is used to “describe the amount of material that will be in the collection, and can be expressed in terms of numbers of items, geographical coverage, temporal coverage or any other aspect of the collection that is appropriate” (Jordan, 2010. P.26). Since teachers' (as curators) goal is to provide various authentic online materials for CFL learners, the key principle we can follow in the practice of content curation is that the materials collected should be diverse. Diversity is urgently needed for the students who learn Chinese language only in the classroom with their teacher and from the textbook. Due to limited class meeting time in language teaching, students have minimal opportunities for interacting with native speakers and limited exposure to variety of functions, genres, speech events, and discourse types that occur in the target language speakers' daily life. The most attractive part of the online resources, however, is that there are a variety of materials that could be used by CFL learners. Variety in format, content, geographical coverage, and in functions, genres and so on can potentially compensate for the restrictions that students face in their classroom learning. Being exposed to the variety of materials, not only learners' four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) can be improved, but also their awareness of language variation, dialect differences, and cultural diversity can be raised. Diversity can be reflected in the following different ways.

First of all, the topic of the online content varies. It ranges from complaints about one's

neighbor to an interesting dialogue between a boss and his secretary in a movie. The collection includes all the topics that appear in the most of the Chinese textbooks used in the United States (Level I & II). In addition, it also includes some topics that are not covered in the beginning and intermediate level textbooks such as complicated relationships in family and society.

Second, the format, genre, and function of materials vary. In the collection there are audio, video, text, and still images and graphs. With each format category, a variety of genres, functions, and types exist. For example, within the category of video, there are movie trailers, TV Plays series, talent shows, advertisement, MVs, and *Xiangsheng* (相声). Talent shows may be singing show, real life show, comedian show and so on.

Within the category of text, there are two basic subcategories (for beginning and intermediate learners), imaginative and informative texts. Within each subcategories, there are further classification (Da, 2004). If special consideration of the online features is taken into, texts could be forum posts, news, blogs, twitter, Wechat or QQ messages, email, and so on. Within audio category, there are songs, recorded voices of different people talking. Within the image category, there are cartoons, photos, and signs. Some of the sub-categories can be further grouped into different groups. For instance, within each type of materials there are different functions, including to entertain, to educate, to inform, to seek truth, to support and so on.

Third, the geographical coverage varies. There are a few countries and regions in the world where Chinese is spoken and they are Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. With more and more Chinese people emigrating from China to different places, there are more and more Chinese speaking communities in the world. There are differences in the use of Chinese among these regions and communities. In Mainland China, for example, people from different area speak Mandarin Chinese with different accents and usage (Hsin, 2014). These geographical diversity should be included to reflect different culture and different use of Chinese language.

Fourth, diversity is also reflected in the change of language. One change in language is the newly coined words, which are very fashionable among young people in China. Some of these words were borrowed from abroad but mixed with the Chinese language and culture to express young people's attitude. These words reflect the change of Chinese language and they also reflect the culture value of people. For example, "hold" is widely used among young people, but it was pronounced as hōu and "d" is not pronounced. There are newly coined pure Chinese words, that are not structurally specific, but highly culturally loaded, such as 土豪, 屌丝, 不作死就不会死. This diversity should also be included in the collection.

Criteria for Collection

Content selection is the heart and soul of curation. What are the criteria for collections? The scope of collection is expanded to include a variety of materials. Generally speaking, within one category (or subcategory), there are a great amount of materials available online. What online materials should be included for the beginning and intermediate Chinese learners? Here are the criteria we teachers could use in selecting the materials: appropriate in difficulty level, engaging, age appropriate, and culturally rich.

Appropriate in difficulty level. As when choosing reading materials for pre-K and elementary school students, we should choose developmentally appropriate ones for them. In a similar fashion, choosing learning materials for beginning and intermediate Chinese learners requires consideration of the difficulty level for learners. This consideration is based on Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982, 1985, 1989) and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development - ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978).

Krashen's Input Hypothesis states that Language learners learn more when they comprehend language input that is slightly more advanced than their current level. Henceforth, the appropriate difficulty level of the input for the learners should be $i+1$, where "i" is the language input and "+1" is the next stage of their language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Vygotsky's ZPD describes the area between what a learner can do without help and what he/she can do with help. Selection of materials needs to taking into consideration of what the students can understand when support is provided.

Language inputs can be categorized into two groups based on the input channel type: reading inputs and auditory/visual input. For reading input, text readability assessment is generally used to decide on text difficulty. However, readability assessment is mostly used to measure the reading materials to see if they are suitable for children in general. In addition, most of the existing work on automatic readability assessment is conducted for English printed text (Aluisio, Specia, Gasperin, & Scarton, 2010; Feng, Elhadad, & Huenerfauth, 2009; Feng, Jansche, Huenerfauth, & Elhadad, 2010), even though some of the assessment was proposed to evaluate the readability of English web pages for children (Eickhoff, Serdyukov, & de Vries, 2010).

Research on readability assessment for Chinese text is still in its initial stage. There are even fewer studies on readability assessment of Chinese texts used for second language or foreign language learning. Shen (2005) did a study investigating the relationship of linguistic complexity and reading comprehension in reading CFL among beginning readers. The findings show both sentence length and word frequency sentence length make an impact on CFL learners' reading comprehension. Da (2009) examined the CFL text difficulty by frequency using two sets of very popularly used CFL textbooks in America (*Integrated Chinese* and *Chinese Link*). He found that for beginning level CFL learners, the targeted measurement could be 10 characters per sentence and for intermediate level CFL learners; the targeted measurement could be 15-20 characters per sentence. The study did not include character frequency information.

As we know, language development of children in their native language environment is different from adults who are learning a second language or a foreign language. Lack of a well-designed assessment tool that could be used for the online materials for CFL learners makes selecting difficulty-level-appropriate materials challenging. The targeted measurement calculated in Da (2009) can be used to help us decide what to include and what to exclude.

For auditory and visual input, watchability is not as important as readability of texts. The images in the movie could help to a great degree with learners' understanding. However, if the language level in the auditory input is more than one stage higher than learners' current level, learners may rely only on the visual input to achieve some degree of comprehension. The language learning part may be lost. Therefore, in choosing the online video/aural materials, *i+1* is also useful.

Engaging. Engaging materials could grasp students' attention and motivate them to learn. Based on the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen, certain emotions such as anxiety and boredom could interfere with the process of acquiring the target language. These negative emotions function as a filter to reduce the amount of language input a learner could comprehend. It is therefore very important to use interesting and engaging materials to achieve learning efficiency. We can first choose those that we enjoy. In addition, it is also helpful to ask the college-age Chinese students of different gender about their preferences in the selection of materials, what they like and what they enjoy, such as what talent show they like, what movie or TV series they often watch. By thus doing, the scope of materials selection is widened and is also oriented toward the interests of users, that is, the CFL learners.

Age Appropriate. This criterion needs to be taken into consideration if content curation is for school students. If it is for elementary school students, it would be appropriate to select contents related to school life, stories, games, puzzles, everyday life and so on. If it is for middle school and high school students, more campus life materials and some controversial topics can be included.

Culturally rich. The materials that have culture elements are a significant plus. Language reflects people's way of life, the value they inherited from the past, their philosophical understanding of life and the world, their artistic taste and so on. Learning a language is not only learning how to speak that language, but also understand under what circumstances certain words/phases are used and what cultural elements that language carries. Even though not all language use collected can be culturally rich, but being culturally rich is one criterion to use when we need to choose between two similar language pieces.

Planning the Project

In this section, I will explain how I planned the project, where I put the data and why I chose that platform. I will also illustrate how the data were organized on that platform.

Where to Put the Data?

To find the best platform is crucial, but it takes a lot of efforts to decide on one. The curated contents should be accessed conveniently to the users. I found the most appropriate one after experiencing a few rounds of “trial and error.”

I originally planned to put the collection at wiki in one of my BlackBoard Learn Course sites. However, there are a few concerns. 1. Wiki is only located in one course. That is to say, only students in that class could have access to it. However, I would like students from different classes and from different years to be able to use the collection. 2. Wiki does not allow searching. That means, the available contents are only listed there and students are able to see all those materials listed on one page or lists of materials on one page and click into anyone of them. This may lead to some confusion.

A few options were explored after the wiki idea was given up. To me, an ideal storage or platform would have the following qualities.

1) It must be password protected. Password protected websites your control over the access to the site.

2) It must allow me to upload some relatively large files, especially video files. The majority of the materials are short video clips (from 10 seconds to about 1 minute). Even though it is also feasible to provide links to the video sources and indicate the starting point and the ending point, it is not convenient for the students to get them. Furthermore, the original source might go wrong if the original website is not well maintained. Taking the materials off the websites and put them in the storage/platform is the most convenient way and makes the materials easy to use.

3) The interface of the platform must be attractive. If only lists of materials are displayed on a page, it'd be too boring for the learners. Capability of being designed to be attractive must be one of the qualities of the platform.

4) It should be searchable. Some materials in the collection are for multiple purposes in helping students learn Chinese. For example, a dining themed video clip could be used for 100 level Chinese learners to learn a grammar structure. It also serves the purpose of teaching learners the dining culture in China. In addition, it may also be used for reading the menu. If a student who's working on that grammar structure, he/she would like to find all those materials related to that grammar structure, he/she should be able to use the search function to locate those. With search function, the collection would be made more relevant to students' learning.

Both Moodle and BlackBoard Learn available at the university are password protected, but blackboard is limited in search function and Moodle is limited at maximal file size for each file. It is okay to connect Cybox (university storage place) with Moodle so that Cybox could be used as a storage place. However, in that case the students who are new to both Moodle and Cybox have to learn both, which may overload them cognitively. That's why I turned to the open resources. Open resources like Weebly and Wordpress allow searching and with a small fee, the uploading size could be increased. However, for Weebly, fee is charged for password protection.

At Wordpress, password can be set without charge. There are many different themes to choose from. With a small fee, an even more attractive theme could be applied to the page. Furthermore, Wordpress is good at different categories and tags. Wordpress allows multiple tabs and sub-tabs which make the site more organized. It also allows user to create a search field and search posts. With tags for each piece of material, users could search to find what they are looking for. Three Gygabites are free of charge. With an annual fee, a very large size of storage is given, which makes it possible to include more as the collection grows. In all, Wordpress satisfied all the conditions. Therefore Wordpress is selected as the data and platform for the curation.

How Data Are Organized at Wordpress?

The designing principle for the first page is that users can easily find what they need. Three different channels are created for this purpose. First, five tabs based on the format were created and they were put at the top of the page: Video, Text, Audio, Images, Buzzwords. Sub-tabs were also created for the main tabs. See figure 1. For example, the video tab was further subcategorized based on topic, such as greeting, traveling, shopping, dining, and so on. See figure 2.

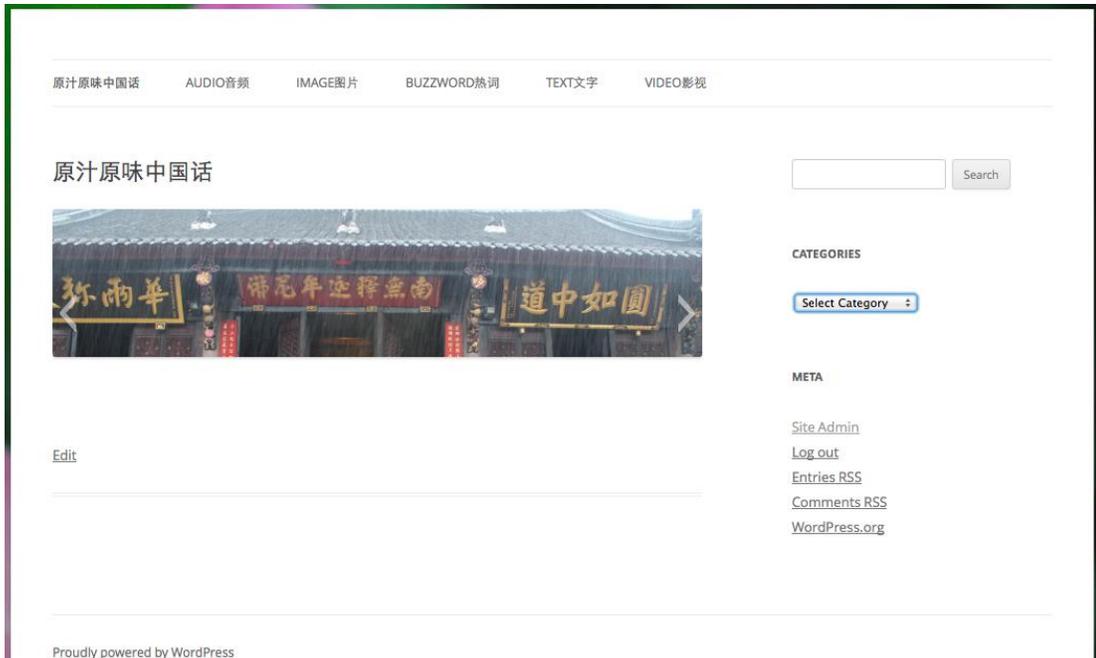


Figure 1. The first page of the Wordpress site.

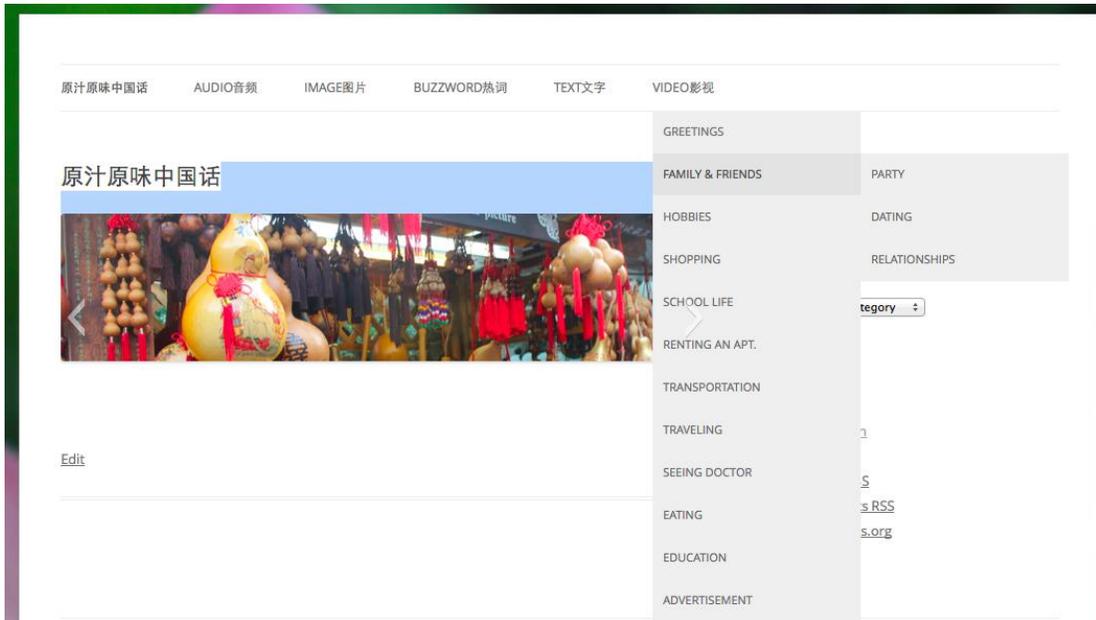


Figure 2. The sub-tabs of Video Tab, an example.

Second, different categories based on difficulty level were created on the right side of the page. Users can search certain format of materials based on how difficult they are. See Figure 3.

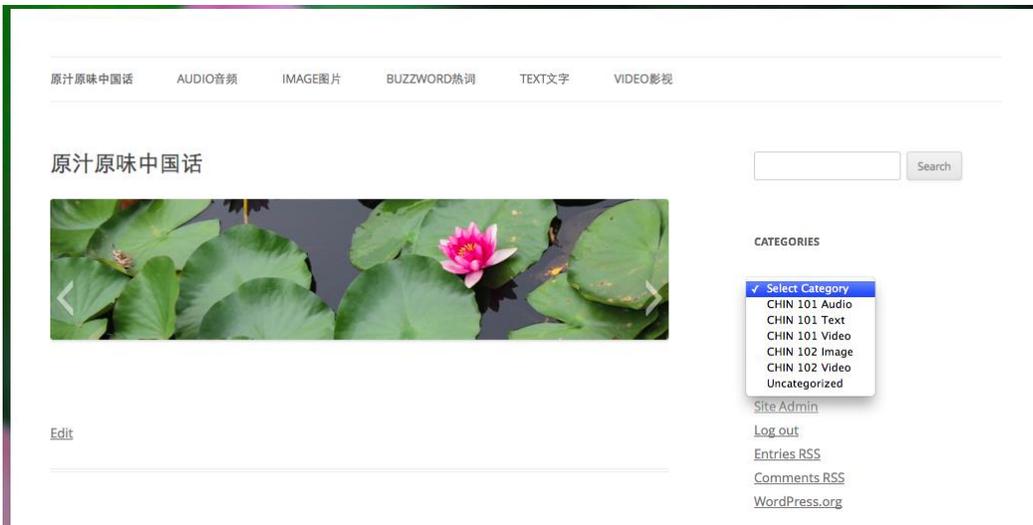


Figure 3. Categories on the right, a different categorization from the tab.

Third, a search plugin was installed. Users can type in query words to search. These query words are the words that were used as tags for each piece of material. See figure 4.

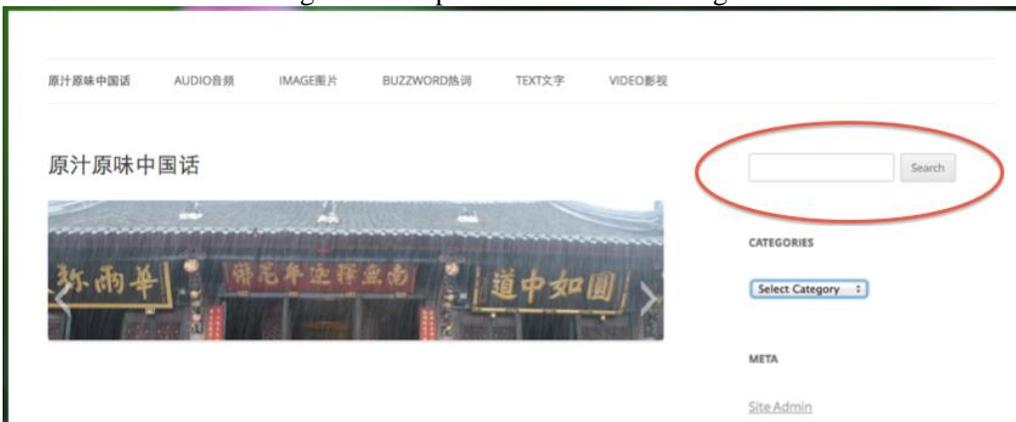


Figure 4. Search plugin

By providing three ways for users to locate needed materials, learners have the freedom to choose based on either format, topic, or from the difficult level, or certain content such as Chinese of different accent, certain grammar points, certain use of words and so on.

Process of Collecting Online Materials

Descriptive Metadata

In collecting materials, each piece of material needs to be marked with metadata, which will later be used as tags for search purpose on the Internet. For instance, if a learner wants to watch movies from Taiwan, he/she can find all the movie clips from Taiwan. The metadata include title, creator/publisher, original web address, date of creation, theme/topic, grammar points involved, region, format/type, subtypes, length/size, cultural point, targeting skills, difficulty level, description, copyright situation. The table below shows the table that could be used in collecting materials.

Table 1.

Metadata form for materials.

Elements	Local label	Record
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Title	Title	
Creator/publisher	Author/publisher	
Web address	Link	
Date	Date created	
Theme/topic	Topic	
Grammar points involved	Structure/words	
Accents	Standard Chinese	
Format (Media, text, image, etc)	Material type	
Type (if it is a movie, what types of movie. If it is text, is it news, forum discussion, passages, etc.)	Sub-type	
Quantity	Length, words, etc	
Region (Mainland, Taiwan, HK, etc)	Region	
Culture	What culture aspects addressed	
Target skills	Skills to improve (listening, reading, writing, and speaking etc.)	
Difficulty level	For 101, 102, 201, or 202	
Description	Content description	
Copyright	Copyright	

Add Pedagogical Support

The UK based Digital Curation Centre (DCC) defines digital curation as “Digital curation involves maintaining, preserving and adding value to digital research data throughout its lifecycle.” Adding value is a major indicator of good curation practice. This applies to content curation for language learning. Adding value to help language learning means to provide supports for the learners. The materials collected are of a higher level of difficulty based on the IH by Krashen. As Vygotsky’s ZPD concept indicates, teachers need to provide necessary support for the learners to achieve their potentials.

For most the materials, context information should be provided. Since most materials are excerpts from a longer work to cater to the students in difficulty level and their interests, excerpts without context may be confusing. Providing brief background information makes these pieces more comprehensible.

Questions should be designed and provided for the students when they get the input. Guariento & Moley (2001) suggest when authentic materials are used adding suitable tasks to learners is important. A thorough understanding is not important anymore in this case. These questions should be designed to engage students in learning by directing their attention to some aspects of the language and culture and making them to connect to their own life. These connections and associations enrich students’ understanding of Chinese language and culture. It also makes learning fun especially when connected to their own daily life.

Supplemental explanation should be provided for most of the materials too. These explanations show the main purpose of the choosing that piece in the collection and they stress what is important for the students to learn. For example, if the text is humorous, and the explanation tells why it is humorous. If a piece has a slightly different accent from the standard Chinese, the explanation tells where the differences are. These explanations help to draw students’ attention to where the teacher wants them to and what the teacher thinks important for them to know.

Look Into the Future

In the fields of museum, cultural heritage, and library sciences, curation takes massive efforts and the digitized contents could reach a large user group. In the field of language education, however, students, learning environments, learning focus, and teachers’ teaching method all vary. This makes a large-scale curatorial project unrealistic and unfitted. This article aims at providing a method for Chinese teachers to curate in a small scale for their own students or to work collaborating with colleagues in the

same school or in a few similar schools for a larger community of learners. The next step is to find out what platform we should use for the curated contents so that the learners/users could have an easy access to them. Once the curated materials are conveniently accessible to students, research is needed to find the most efficient ways for the students to utilize them. I believe various good ways of utilizing the curated materials will come up once teachers as curators start the curating process.

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