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Making sense of a new language: authenticity and semiotics in additional language learning

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Abstract: The concept of authenticity has received much discussion in applied linguistics and educational studies. Valuable insights have been gained into how authenticity is problematised in language teaching and how to improve the situation by engaging learners with better-designed materials and activities. These achievements notwithstanding, empirical evidence remains insufficient to understand learners' meaning-making endeavours in real-life learning scenarios. The current study attempts to examine authenticity in additional language learning from a semiotic perspective, which may shed new light on the complex cognitive process of beginner learners' first encounter with a new language and how this process could be motivated and facilitated by teachers in a classroom setting. Evidence of semiotic articulation and production of authenticity from a low-pressure Spanish classroom is analysed focussing on cultural authenticity, interactive authenticity and authenticity of behaviour and engagement. The evidence is discussed to find how semiotic resources in combination with lived experiences may help learners' comprehension and appreciation of the target language and its culture. These findings reveal the relevance and value of semiotic approaches to language teaching research and provide practical implications for exposing pre-tertiary young learners to languages other than English for more diverse and extensive learning experiences.

Keywords: authenticity; semiotics; meaning-making; languages other than English; additional language learning

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1 First encounter with a new language

We had the fortune to know Sarah, a US-born writer-cum-translator living in Xalapa, Mexico. Having spent 20 years in the country as an American expat, Sarah has managed to develop her proficiency in Spanish to an exceedingly high level. Working for years as a professional English Spanish translator and a regular contributor to *Mexico News Daily*, she sounds no different from the local people. Despite this admirable achievement, she started her journey with anxiety and embarrassment just like anyone who is being introduced to a new language. In a public interview, she revealed her first days in the country as a foreigner.

> I really cried the first month in Mexico. I cried every day because I just felt so stupid. They gave me a host family with a three-year-old and an eight-year-old. […] So I was with these kids and I just thought, 'Oh, my god! This three-year-old can understand things and talk and I don't know what's going on'. And then the eight-year-old thought it was hilarious to talk really fast to me and then say something to me like '*¿No entendiste nada*?' ('Didn't you understand anything?') [teasing laugh]

We empathise with Sarah's situation because most of us share the experience of being frustrated by a new language, which, at that time of being exposed to its indecipherable sounds, felt rather defeated. For those who later overcame this frustration and forged ahead like Sarah, the alien language began to make sense and merge into patterns that became the major source that moulded their practices in that language. This meaning-making process appears to many as a natural result of one's extensive exposure to the environment where the language is used for day-to-day communication, stereotypically in Sarah's case, a country where the language is used as a native language.

However, for the majority of learners who do not have the luxury of visiting the native-speaking country and learning the language through direct 'first-hand' experience, there are regular classes for them to experience the language with the help of teachers, textbooks and learning activities designed to demonstrate to them what the language is like and how it works. Whilst one may expect to have a more friendly and encouraging environment with no teasing or mocking, the authenticity of such an environment has long been questioned since linguists first became aware of the discordance between classroom and reality (Sweet 1899). Making sense of a new language entails making sense of the particular sign system embedded in a particular sociocultural setting, rather than merely deciphering a bunch of codes based on the established arbitrary connections between the linguistic signs and the reality they point to. Unlike native-speaking contexts where the learner is uncompromisingly exposed to the target language as Sarah experienced in her host family, oftentimes, what learners find in a foreign language classroom is a language being

recontextualised to be made locally relevant to the learners whose experience is largely confined to the local context of knowledge and practices. A popular common criticism of such regular classroom teaching targets its 'lack of (an authentic) environment', which is conservatively rated as inferior to the 'authentic' native-speaking context. This line of understanding breeds such popular beliefs that learners studying in the target language culture would naturally develop into competent speakers (Freed 1995). However, apart from superficial reasons for setting the native and the non-native contexts apart (e.g. exposure to the 'real' language, and opportunities to put the language into 'real' practice), much of the discussion has not yet gone beyond impressionistic and hypothetical inferences. The purpose of this article is thus to first consider an alternative way of seeing language learning through a semiotic lens with an eye to the differences between the stereotypical scenarios of learning a foreign language. To fortify the proposed way of viewing, we then present evidence from a real-world teaching scenario, which involves beginner learners' facilitated efforts to approach a new language in a low-pressure setting that enables the exploitation of semiotic resources for meaning-making.

2 A semiotic account of language pedagogy

Over the past quarter of a century, efforts to combine semiotics with language teaching research have been made to explore the relevance of semiotics in language education (Danesi 2000), the sociocultural ecology of language learning (van Lier 2004) and the social semiotic significance of language in education (Coffin and Donohue 2014; Mickan & Lopez 2016). Researchers have also investigated teachers' use of (trans-)semiotic resources to assist in learners' development of specific competence (e.g. Çimenli 2015; Nöth 2014; Ollerhead 2019) and communication in virtual space (Guichon and Wigham 2016; Liang 2012). These studies have given valuable insights into how learning a language can be a semiotically rich experience but have given relatively less attention to the fundamental question of why learning is possible in the first place and how meaning-making is made possible in different learning contexts. In this section, we first trace the origin of meaning in learners' experience of a new language and then we illustrate the process of meaning-making in typical learning scenarios, with a focus on foreign language learning in the classroom setting.

Language constitutes a powerful symbolic system, which sustains the projection of meaning through the culturally conditioned intuition of its users (Le Coq 1955). Such meaning projection underlies information exchange and mutual understanding in verbal communication within the speech community. To revisit the Saussurean dyadic model of a sign, the signified is a mental concept validated by its categorical or classificatory significance in designating a range of referents, whereas

the signifier is the actualisation of that abstract category or class in various forms (Saussure 1983). As such, a linguistic sign takes the perceivable form of a string of speech sounds or a written mark (signifier) to represent a perceived object or concept (signified); hence, to make sense of a sign as a 'meaning-laden perception' ('*xie-dai yi-yi de gan-zhi*' Zhao 2016, p. 27) entails unpacking the meaning through reception, perception, and interpretation, which draws heavily from one's lived experience. The relationship between the signifier and the signified undergirds the receiver's effort to extract meaning from the perceived linguistic sign. Once the relationship is established and reinforced via repetition or recurrence, meaning in conventional contexts of usage becomes readily available to the receiver and the process can be completed with efficiency. In the case of learning one's native language, the establishment of the relationship is often initiated by forging associations between speech sounds and contingent perceivable entities, a process facilitated by the instinctive or purposeful use of motherese or baby talk, which foregrounds the distinguishing features of the targeted sound pattern.

Whilst the relationship seems to be efficiently established in the learning of one's native language, the same ease is often not expected in the learning of a new one, especially when learning begins much later in one's life. Yet, if the meaning-making mechanism is shared across language systems, what might have caused the difference in a semiotic sense? To attempt to answer this question, we illustrate the process of learning a foreign language with the case of Chinese learners of English. If we start with the basic unit of the language and expose learners to a couple of new words, what is possibly going on in the learners' minds? Take the writing instrument that we believe the learners are all too familiar with. Now we have several choices. We can present the symbol of a writing instrument in the form of a humble pencil (Figure 1A), a Western-stylish quill (Figure 1B) or a traditional Chinese writing brush (Figure 1C). For young learners born and raised in China, these presentations may evoke different reactions, with possible differences across generations. Whilst a child in the past may find some of these images more readily recognisable than others, children raised today are likely to recognise all three images with ease. Their

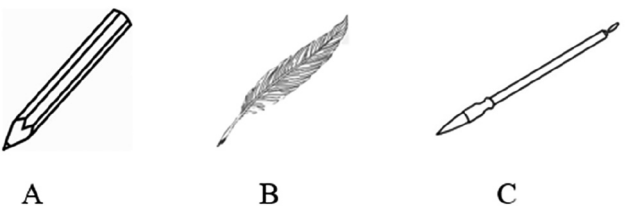

Figure 1: Symbols of a writing instrument. A: image of a pencil; B: image of a quill; C: image of a Chinese writing brush.

recognition is based on their experiential and/or non-experiential knowledge of the object being presented (e.g. they may have used the object or they have read, seen or heard about it). They know what the object is used for but may or may not yet know the linguistic sign for it.

Learning something as basic as a word involves a series of cognitive efforts made to process the signified (e.g. a designated collection of objects or a specified concept) and the signifier (e.g. the spoken or the written form of the word) before building a connection between the two.[1] With the native language, one's experience of the referents of the sign often precedes or simultaneously occurs with the experience associated with the signifier, e.g. a child has the experience of eating an apple before or while hearing the word 'apple'. In this case, one may have direct experience and perception of one's surroundings before being led to name the specific objects and concepts within the surroundings, thus establishing the relationship between the signified and the signifier through bodily experience in situ.

In comparison, learning a foreign language involves more complex situations and processes, since now we are dealing with two language systems at the same time (Table 1). To start with, given the systemic differences and differences in sociocultural contexts, we cannot expect the two languages to project meaning in the same way, nor can we assume that the linguistically actualised perceptions in one system are exhaustively articulated in the other. In some cases, the signified object or concept may be shared or largely overlapping across the two systems. The image of a pencil in the example above may evoke in Chinese learners of English a similar concept to that in the minds of native speakers of English as the pencil as we know it today has become a widely used and standardised writing instrument worldwide. Its Chinese equivalent '*qian-bi*' has also been established in the local system of language and culture. Yet, not all shared concepts and experiences have been equally put into words in different languages. One typical example is the case of 'untranslatable words', in which signifiers are absent in the local system that can capture the meaning of specific expressions in the foreign language, despite that local speakers may have similar concepts and experiences that remain unnamed or unuttered. For instance, the Yiddish word '*naches*', which describes one's feeling of pride and joy typically derived from the achievement of one's child, is believed untranslatable into English, the same as the Chinese word '*zheng-qi*' (a polysemous word which could be used to describe a child who wins glory for the family) defies a sufficient English translation.

1 It should be made clear that in his original pursuit, Saussure did not target the relation between a physical object in the world and its designation, 'but a psychological entity that amounts to signhood' (Cobley 2006, p. 758). Post-Saussurean linguists (Harris 2001) who adopt a relaxed and extended interpretation tend to go beyond mental entities and include actualised forms of the sign and its referent.

Table 1: Semiotic differences involved in vocabulary learning between one's native language and a foreign language.

Learning experience	System(s) of linguistic signs involved		Experience with the signified	Experience with the signifier
Native language	Signified and signifier within one system		Often comes first or simultaneously	Often comes afterwards or simultaneously
Foreign language	Signified shared or largely overlapping	Signifier present in the local and the target system	Comes first	Comes afterwards
		Signifier present only in the target system	Comes first yet unnamed	Comes afterwards
	Signified absent in one system	Signified absent in the local system	Comes afterwards or never comes	Comes first
		Signified absent in the target system	Comes first	Comes afterwards in a locally relevant situation

Meanwhile, there are cases where the signified object or concept is not shared but is found missing in one system. A common situation one may experience when learning a foreign language in one's local context turns out to be the opposite of what happens in native language learning. That is, before gaining the experience with the signified, one is presented with a linguistic sign and instructed to make sense of it and memorise it, e.g. the word 'cheesecake' may be taught to a pupil who has never seen or tasted a real cheesecake in real life. Back to the example of learning the vocabulary of writing instruments: pupils may lack the experience of writing with a real quill, yet they may have heard of a quill from stories and/or have seen the image of a quill in films like *Harry Potter*. On the contrary, learners may have gained real-life experience with locally specific objects or concepts (e.g. practising Chinese calligraphy with a '*mao-bi*'), yet the signified is absent in the target system (e.g. the English phrase 'a traditional Chinese writing brush' is descriptive at best). The learning of the equivalent expression often occurs in a locally relevant situation (e.g. an English speech contest with the topic of introducing Chinese culture).

Admittedly, there are objects and concepts one may never experience in life or get to know about (e.g. skydiving, adrenaline, hamartia). In learning the linguistic signs for these objects and concepts, the divide between the native and the foreign language becomes blurred. Learning the periodic table by heart can be equally challenging for learners of any ethnolinguistic background as the association between the exotic sounds and spellings/characters and the invisible elements is not as easy to establish as that between 'apple' and the taste of that juicy fruit.

Despite the differences in learning vocabulary between one's native language and a foreign language, what makes learning possible in the first place is the possibility of meaning-making across languages based on 'the same signifying properties' (Danesi 2000, p. 167). Thus, we may come to see learning any language – native or non-native – as a meaning-making process where the learner endeavours to make sense of the language and conversely or consequently the language makes sense to the learner. Though this meaning-making process appears to be sequential in that the accessibility of the meaning conveyed by the language necessarily results from the learner's accumulative meaning-making endeavour, we cannot dismiss the complexity of the array of cognitive activities involved in this process, which very likely encompass recursive and reflexive practices that defy a linear development of capacity and capability.

Learning a language that is not our native presents a real challenge because fundamentally there is an inherent mismatch between the 'linguistic worlds' constructed by our language and the language of others. That is, working with shared 'signifying properties', different languages generate different realities based on the specific sociocultural and historical contexts in which they are embedded. To learn a language is to make meaning possible. If such meaning is oriented towards social communication and interaction, then learning cannot be a mere decontextualized decoding process but necessarily involves situated practices for one to have the experience of perceiving the sign so that one can work to establish the association between the signified and the signifier by drawing from one's physical and mental lives.

3 Authenticity in additional language learning

After sorting out the similarities and differences between learning one's native and non-native language in a semiotic sense, we now get back to the much-debated issue of authenticity in language teaching and learning. Following the previous discussion, we may reconsider authenticity as the reality constructed by a language with its generative potential shaped by its inherent structural features and specific sociocultural circumstances. We normally do not find authenticity a problem when there is only one system, as in the case of learning our native language, because what we see and experience as 'reality' corresponds to the reality constructed by the language. We find ourselves confronting a problem of authenticity when there are two 'realities' one of which we are not physically engaged. That is, we may need to draw from our mental lives rather than our physical lives to perceive the signs in an endeavour to understand them. In cases where our mental lives fail to provide us with materials to help conjure up the image of the signified, we can only vaguely

perceive what the linguistic sign signifies even if we are taught to memorise its form (signifier) and 'meaning'. The forced memory of a signifier without perception grounded in lived experience is fluid and flimsy and may be hard to sustain. That is why some foreign language learners find the target language remains 'foreign' even after years of practice. They may have mastered the rules and principles to make the language 'useful' yet may lack experience for a deeper and richer perception to make the language 'meaningful' to themselves.

Apart from incomplete experience and perception, we may not be clear about what reality the target language is projected onto, since signification is subject to socio-historical conditioning, a constantly changing reality that modifies and updates the relationship between the signifier and the signified (Stawarska 2015). This focus on the dynamicity of reality inspires theoretical endeavours to restore language learning to a situated practice in its complex ecological surroundings (e.g. Kramsch 2008; Tudor 2003; van Lier 2010). Informed by ecological linguistics, the perspective takes full account of the sociocultural contexts in which learning practices take place (van Lier 2004) and foregrounds the range of influences that have shaped learners' decisions and performances (Kramsch 2008). It acknowledges the complexity inherent to the language teaching profession and offers a means to tap into the reality experienced by learners and teachers (Tudor 2003). With regard to classroom teaching, such a reality is often vaguely visible and can only be partially revealed by investigations focussing on learning outcomes or teacher-student interaction, thus leaving unexamined the diverse and interlaced influences from different sources.

Diverse lines of studies in language teaching have adopted the ecological-semiotic perspective. Teachers' instructional practices (Hu 2005a), teaching style (Elahi Shirvan et al. 2016), identity (Edwards and Burns 2016), agency (Peña-Pincheira and De Costa 2021), well-being (Herrera et al. 2022; Mercer 2023) and so forth have been the topics of interest. Some studies have analysed the powerful role of materials in structuring classroom interaction, highlighting affordances and emergence as the subtle aspects of classroom learning that have been made visible under an ecological-semiotic lens (Brown 2014; Guerrettaz and Johnston 2013).

In a classroom setting, learners are exposed to a miniature social reality constructed by their physical surroundings, linguistic signs as a primary vehicle of meaning and multimodal resources that convey and supplement meaning. In this sense, learners are invited to co-construct with the teacher a 'temporarily shared social world[s]' (Thorne 2005) in which their activities are meaningful and authentic as they are conducted using real language produced by real speakers for real communicative purposes (Morrow 1977). Following the ecological-semiotic view of language learning, we identify three dimensions of authenticity that intend to capture learners' meaning-making endeavours in the classroom and serve as the nexus of the reality constructed in the classroom and that of the target discourse

community. These include cultural authenticity, interactive authenticity and authenticity of behaviour and engagement.

- Cultural authenticity targets people, activities and artefacts that are commonly seen as representative for the culture;
- Interactive authenticity targets communicative activities that naturally fit into the classroom setting, which enables learners to interact with each other and with the teacher in a manner consistent with real-life communication;
- Authenticity of behaviour and engagement targets individual learners' self-directed and reflective practices independent of external influences.
  (adapted from Will and Pinner 2023, p. 2),

With this pronounced focus, we conducted an empirical study to find evidence of authenticity and its semiotic articulation and production in an additional language classroom. We further examined how the use of semiotic resources combined with participants' lived experiences could have facilitated learners' efforts to make sense of the target language, motivating them to explore the reality of the target language and culture.

4 Empirical evidence from an additional language classroom

Exciting new trends are embraced in the changing landscape of language education as we march into a new era when traditional pedagogy is shaken by updated approaches and paradigms and when learning is liberated from the formal classroom setting (Reinders et al. 2022). As globalisation creates closer connections and interaction between countries, the foreign language learning landscape becomes more diverse in the stereotypical monolingual sociocultural contexts, with learners actively seeking opportunities to learn languages other than English (LOTE). In China, where the foreign language teaching practice runs deep in the country's history, English has long been sought as the major foreign language to gain access to international resources (Hu 2005b), which has led to a mountain of research on English language teaching and learning (ELTL), making China a well-documented case in the ELTL literature. Over recent years, however, efforts to strengthen connections with non-English-speaking parts of the world like the Belt and Road Initiative have led to a surge of interest in the hitherto dismissed so-termed 'small foreign languages' (*xiao-yu-zhong*), which, as the name suggests, take an insignificant share of the country's foreign language learning market (Gao and Zheng 2019). While English continues to dominate the foreign language curriculum across contexts of

education, tendencies and trends of LOTE learning deserve research attention as they can be seen as predictive of the future of multilingual education worldwide, with China holding the promise to produce greater numbers of LOTE learners than native-speakers of those languages (ibid.).

Over the past few years, researchers have refocused their attention to examine the emerging LOTE enterprise in China (Chen et al. 2020; He et al. 2023; Kang et al. 2022; Lu and Shen 2022; Wang 2023; Wu and Liu 2023; Yu and Xu 2023). This line of research mainly focuses on LOTE learning at the tertiary level, in particular foreign language universities and groups of 'professional' learners, i.e. students who major in LOTE or English major students who study LOTE as a second foreign language. In contrast to the published findings about learning Chinese as a LOTE among young learners in Anglophone or multilingual contexts (e.g. Chen & Zhang 2014; Scrimgeour 2014; Xu and Knijnik 2021), scant details have been reported on LOTE learning at the pre-tertiary level in China.

4.1 Spanish as a popular LOTE choice

Learning Spanish as a foreign language has gained momentum over recent years, with its total number of learners ranking the world's second after English (Molina 2006: 19). In China, Spanish is currently among the five most-studied languages in the school curriculum (beating out Russian and German and trailing only English, Japanese and French) and the only Romance language of the top five. According to Wang and Xu (2015), the number of students studying Spanish as a major in degree programmes at the undergraduate and graduate levels was 10,563 nationwide, which was conservative estimation of the tertiary-level learners of Spanish in China. University students learning Spanish as a second foreign language (i.e. students who major in English or English-related subjects are required to study a second foreign language) or an additional language (i.e. non-English-major students who attend LOTE courses offered by the university) contribute a respectable addition to this number. Additionally, non-language-major learners' self-motivated efforts are also likely left unregistered. University students aside, the interest in learning multiple languages is also shared by a growing number of younger-aged learners who get exposed to a wider variety of language resources in families with an early investment in children's multilingual development via private tutoring, use of picturebooks and other learning materials.

Apart from the increasing communication and mobility of cultural products thanks to China's active participation in globalisation and opening up, the observed rising interest in learning Spanish among pre-tertiary Chinese students can also be attributed to changes and tendencies in education policy and practice. One

noteworthy change is the recent modification made to the Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges, known as the *gaokao* tests; the renewed scheme included Spanish as an option for the subject of foreign language (Ministry of Education 2017, p. 3). The other is the trend towards the massification of overseas education, with the country's better-off cities seeing an increasingly younger age of students going abroad for study (Cheng et al. 2017) as an alternative path to higher education. In Shanghai, for instance, 25 senior high schools have LOTE courses, amongst which Spanish is offered in 11 schools (Guo 2020). In an interview with a senior high school graduate from one LOTE school in Shanghai (Shu 2022), the student recalled her experience of learning English and Spanish since Grade 6 and highlighted the benefit of knowing the 'Spanish version of the word roots (referring to the Latin-derived lexicon)', which aided her memory of the complex terminology in chemistry and biology. In the city where our data were collected, there are currently five middle schools with a stable staff of Spanish language teachers (including native-speaker foreign nationals). In schools where the students aim to seek overseas education after graduation, Spanish is taught as a regular subject as English in the school curriculum (e.g. five English classes and four Spanish classes on a weekly basis). Meanwhile, there are at least three middle schools operating extracurricular Spanish classes taught by teachers hired from universities or other educational institutions.

4.2 'Interest Class' Spanish in a low-pressure learning setting

We collected empirical data from a course entitled 'Interest Class' (*xing-qu ban*) – a series of extracurricular courses operated by a provincial key middle school (henceforth M School) in eastern coastal China. The self-evident name of the class indicates its deviation from the traditional language classes offered in foundational education as the students voluntarily choose to experience the Spanish language as a way to expand their academic interest and competence rather than a means of gaining credits or improving academic excellence. These non-credit-bearing courses are aimed to provide students with learning opportunities beyond the normal classroom to expand their interests and competence. This innovative attempt is partially in response to the Double Reduction Policy (Kong 2023), which targets the expansion of students' interests and skills for holistic development. The 'Interest Class' courses are offered in 15 different options, covering a variety of subjects, including language, mathematics, physics, artificial intelligence, astronomy and philosophy. Spanish is offered as one of the four foreign language options (the other three are French, German and Japanese).

Whilst research attention has been focused on unpacking pressure-induced anxiety in the foreign language classroom, much less is known about the opposite learning situation, where constraints of a traditional classroom are reduced or removed and where learners are given liberty to exercise agency to direct and supervise their own learning practices (Reinders et al. 2022). Typical low-pressure learning environments that have been explored include 'dabbling' in cultural immersion (Casanave 2012), social networking (Zourou 2019), electronically mediated learning on the Internet (Mirzaee and Gharibeh 2016; Sadler 2020), self-paced learning with software programmes (Sporn et al. 2020) and digital platforms (El-Hariri 2017). In comparison with the focused discussion around informal types of learning facilitated by advancing technology (Reinders et al. 2022), relatively little has been revealed about the less formal types of learning that take place inside the brick-and-mortar classroom. Moreover, whilst previous studies have found low-pressure learning flexible, informal and conducive to agency, they were mainly conducted with adult learners. How younger learners respond to this type of learning condition remains unclear.

In this article, we argue that low-pressure learning is more contingent on how learning is carried out than the physical setting where learning is situated. That is, learning in the virtual space is not necessarily less stressful than learning in the traditional classroom. Conversely, classroom-situated learning, if designed and implemented properly, may turn out to be more enjoyable and liberating than learning that is heavily mediated by digital means.

4.3 Data collection and analysis

The design of the study followed the classroom ethnography approach (Erickson 2010). The corresponding author is recruited as the teacher for the Interest Class Spanish and has been conducting courses for three batches of students. This teacher-researcher role enables long-term close observation of and participation in the class on a routine basis. This participant role of the researcher is in accordance with the ecological-semiotic perspective with its emphasis on contextuality and openness (Kramsch and Steffensen 2008, p. 19). We consider the Interest Class as a low-pressure learning setting in which fieldwork and reporting took place, 'a local ecosystem of relations of simultaneous and mutual influence' (Erickson 2010, p. 322) that worked to influence individuals' practices. The class is taught on a weekly basis, with each session lasting 75 min (including break time). Twenty-three students (16 male and 7 female) were involved in the study. The current inquiry tracked two full-semester sessions of the class, with the students' assent and their parents' consent obtained beforehand. Data were collected from classroom audio recordings, pre- and

post-class surveys, ad-hoc interviews conducted with students after classes, teaching and learning materials (e.g. textbooks, assignments, classwork, in-class presentations), teaching notes and the teacher's reflective journal entries. This hybrid methodology (Pinner 2019) allows practitioners to delve into the complex dynamics of classroom language teaching and offers a close view of the dynamic meaning-making process as teaching unfolds.

The analysis of the qualitative data was carried out by both authors using inductive and deductive coding (Braun and Clarke 2006). The written documents were first coded to locate semiotic articulation and production of authenticity as they were manifested in cultural representations, classroom interactions and individual behaviours. Meanwhile, the coding also aimed at unravelling how the use of semiotic resources in combination with lived experiences worked to influence the students' meaning-making endeavour in the class. The classroom recordings were then analysed to triangulate the coding results of the documents and to add new evidence or refine identified ones. In the next section, we report our findings with representative vignettes to demonstrate how authenticity was articulated and produced in the additional language classroom and how semiotic resources and lived experiences assisted the learners in comprehending and appreciating the new language and its culture.

5 A semiotic wonderland: engaging young learners in Interest Class Spanish

In what Gee (2008) called a 'semiotic domain' where multiple modalities (e.g. spoken or written language, images, graphs, gestures, audio and visual materials) are employed to convey meaning and intentions, language learning can happen in such a 'domain' of classroom practices with the collaborative endeavour of teachers and learners. Here, we adopt the fanciful wording of 'wonderland' to encapsulate the adventurous and joyful experience Interest Class Spanish offers to learners who are lured into the target language by exploiting semiotic resources inside the classroom while mobilising experiential and non-experiential knowledge of the class participants.

5.1 Authentic cultural experience

The Interest Class Spanish classroom was described by the students as being a 'very different' place where they 'journeyed through the fantastic Spanish-speaking

countries and cultures'. This journey took place in the physical setting of the classroom, where moveable tables and chairs allowed flexible spaces for implementing activities. While preparing for the class, the teacher foresaw the challenges of teaching 'a class of a very different kind' in one journal entry.

> I have taught learners at different levels, most of them adult learners, including college students and navy officers. With different learners, I used different materials and methods. Yet, this would be a class of a very different kind. With young learners, I cannot use the standard textbooks, which are designed mainly for adult learners who can easily understand the explanations for vocabulary and grammar. For 7–8 graders, the textbook would be too difficult and they need something easier to understand and something more interesting to enjoy. At the end of the day, they are taking this class for fun, not for serious purposes like passing an exam or getting a certificate. […] I think I need to play the 'culture card', that is, to have the students experience the culture first to arouse their interest before teaching the less fun part of the language.

The teacher's expectations were accurate about learners' reactions as the students revealed in the post-class survey that they enjoyed the Spanish class more than their regular English classes for reasons including more freedom (92 %), more classroom activities (83 %), less homework (75 %), lower pressure (67 %) and no formal exam (50 %). These features created an insular space within the classroom where learners were encouraged to exercise their agency to have a new experience of learning a new language. One student who was 'intimidated' by the English classes due to his poorly rated performance thought the Spanish class offered a way for him to 'escape into a different world' where 'the language is made real'. When asked what he meant by 'real', the student explained, 'It's not all about words, but something I can see, touch and smell'.

Moreover, as the teacher predicted, younger learners may have to struggle more than adult learners to understand the text, which dominates the traditional teaching materials. Meaning-making for learners at this age needs to be aided by non-textual modes of discourse, which present the object or concept in tangible ways for learners to perceive the signified through sensory experiences. By contrast, the regular English classes feature exercises and activities that focus on gaining experience with the signifier (e.g. through form-focused pattern drills and rote learning practices) rather than the signified (e.g. through exposure to meaning-conveying objects from the target culture) in teaching the lexical units within the language system.

The meaning these students derived from this distinctive low-pressure learning experience was not limited to their interest in studying the language as a system of signs, as they also felt strongly encouraged to go beyond the classroom to explore the Spanish-speaking culture. In the post-class survey, the students rated 'experiencing Spanish culture' as their favourite classroom activity. In this activity, the teacher would present authentic cultural artefacts in class and encourage the students to

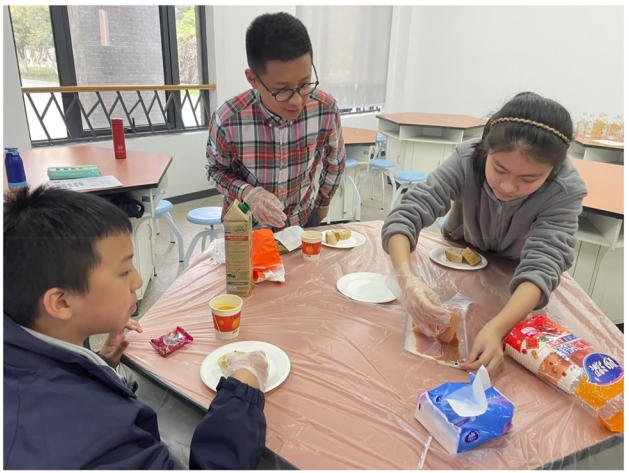

Figure 2: Food-tasting activity in class.

observe and describe these objects using newly acquired knowledge and language. These included currencies used in different Spanish-speaking countries, traditional folk art pieces and speciality food and drink products. In one class, the teacher brought *jamón* (ham), *queso* (cheese) and *baguettes* (bread) for a lesson on Spanish tapas culture. The teacher's reflective note read:

> Today I brought *jamón*, *queso* and *baguettes* to the students to help them learn something about the Spanish tapas culture. They were very excited about trying the food and they loved *jamón* a lot! The authentic experience obviously impressed them more than the videos and the lectures.

The food-tasting activity was particularly attractive to the students (Figure 2), whose attention was focused on the 'exotic' food items they had not so far experienced. One girl commented on her first bite of what she referred to as the '*xi-ban-ya huo-tui*' (Spanish ham), saying:

> It was my first bite of the 'Spanish ham'. I was somewhat excited because I had never tried the ham before and it looked interesting. I was surprised to find how delicious it was! I would choose to have the class next semester if I have the chance – just to have another bite of the 'Spanish ham'! (Luna, 7th grader)

Luna's excitement was shared by her classmates as they savoured the food as a specimen of authentic culture that was hitherto distant from their lived experiences. Her lexical choice to refer to the food item using a modified phrase '*xi-ban-ya huo-tui*' (Spanish ham) could be seen as the student's endeavour to make sense of the culturally alien object by associating it with a locally relevant and familiar object.

Perceivable differences notwithstanding, the signified collection of food items sharing the characterising features of *jamón* is reminiscent of '*huo-tui*' (ham) in the local context. Such authentic cultural experience in the Spanish class offered to connect the students with the target language and culture by evoking imagination, emotion and bodily senses (Gilmore 2007; MacDonald et al. 2006). By exposure to representative pieces of culture, the class allowed learners to attempt their personal ways of meaning-making by building a visceral connection to the world that was yet unexplored (Beresova 2015).

The authentic cultural experience offered by the Interest Class seemed to have exerted a positive influence on the students who showed increasing motivation and engagement as the class proceeded. Moreover, their bodily and sensory experience of items from the target culture prepared them for making sense of the target language as learners' gained experiences with the signified could inform their meaning-making endeavour with the signifier by virtue of their perceptive foundation.

5.2 Authentic interaction with teachers and peers

As the students confessed, the Interest Class differed remarkably from their regular classes, in which they were expected to 'sit still and listen'. The class's special design was in line with the guidelines of the Interest Class series, which emphasises interactive activities to stimulate the students' interests to learn and explore. The class followed a student-centred style, with the teacher letting go of traditional responsibilities and experimenting with novel ideas to encourage self-regulated learning (McCabe and O'Connor 2013). Hence, the classroom was characterised by active interaction between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves. The interaction came in a variety of forms, combining spoken and written forms of different languages, and the meaning-making process was facilitated by the teacher's strategic use of multiple semiotic resources.

One noteworthy detail was found in the overall design of the courseware, which incorporated a mixture of texts, images and audio-visual elements to deliver the message to the students in an accessible manner. To cater to the learners' needs for bitesize information, the slides were designed to foreground images or audio-visual elements with proportionally less text compared with slides used with more mature learners. Translanguaging and trans-semiotic practices were frequently adopted to make the content relevant to the students. When explaining the word '*dónde*' (where), the teacher used the following slide (Figure 3).

On the left-hand column of the slide, we saw the target word '*dónde*' in a white colour font on a background of Aegean blue. The larger remainder space of the slide was occupied by the illustration featuring a cartoon figure from *Dora the Explorer*, a

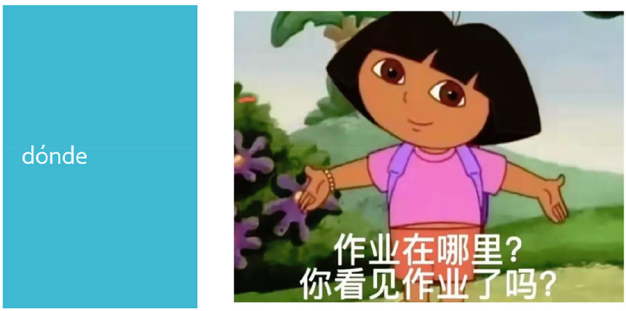

Figure 3: PowerPoint slide explaining the word '*dónde*'.

popular animated television series from the United States (the original product is interactive where viewers are invited to help Dora solve problems while learning some Spanish words or phrases from her). The cartoon character, Dora, was presented as a schoolgirl spreading out her arms with innocent-looking wide eyes. The Chinese-language text was placed at the bottom of the picture in a matching white colour font, saying: '*zuo-ye zai na-li*' (Where is homework?) and '*ni kan-jian zuo-ye le ma*' (Have you seen homework?). The signified of the word '*dónde*' designates an abstract concept, which, in comparison with concrete objects, could be more challenging for young learners to grasp. To make the meaning accessible to the students, the teacher used a light-hearted illustration and explanatory L1 text to evoke the students' lived experience of forgetting to bring homework to school. The elicited memory of similar experiences in the students' immediate context of living enabled them to perceive the situation framed by the adverb of place. The juxtaposition of the Spanish word, the illustrative cartoon and the Chinese-language sentences worked to help learners gauge the meaning of the word and establish connections between the signified and the signifier across languages and cultures.

The interactive classroom activities include prepared presentations, dialogue practices and games. One of the students' favourite activities was the word-guessing game (Figure 4). In this activity, one student played the role of the teacher and presented to the class the slides with one slide featuring one picture. The other students would compete in pre-assigned groups to guess the target word, which was randomly chosen from their newly learnt vocabulary. The purpose of this activity was to help learners review and enhance their memory of the words with which they could express some simple ideas.

In Figure 4, the girl who acted as the teacher showed the class a slide featuring the picture of a man trying to put his arms around a giant pumpkin. Before revealing the answer, the students were motivated to make guesses of the target word in hopes of winning points for their groups. In this specific case, the target word '*grande*' (big)

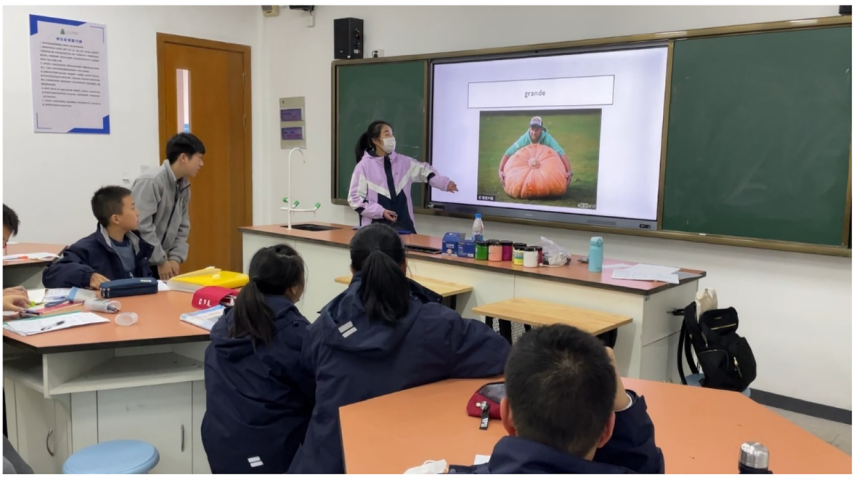

Figure 4: Word-guessing game in class.

was chosen from the basic vocabulary for shapes, colours and sizes which the students had learnt in previous classes. The image of a man with a giant pumpkin was expected to evoke an association between the size of the pumpkin and the abstract descriptive meaning of the target word. By pinning down the indefinite meaning of the word with one solid object situated in a specific context with an emphatic touch, the image worked to elicit and consolidate learners' memory of the signifier (i.e. the written form of the word later to appear on the slide) through their perception of the signified.

In addition to the meaning-making endeavours among the students, interactions between the teacher and the students also showcased cooperative efforts towards understanding the new language, a process mediated by translanguaging practices. The transcribed classroom interaction below was taken from a teaching episode where the teacher introduced several new words to the students.

Teacher: (I heard that) you have a goose in the school canteen. Is that true?
Students: Yes.
Teacher: The Spanish for 'goose' is '*ganso*'.
[…]
Student: Is there a word for '*somebody*' (English original) in Spanish?
Teacher: '*Somebody*' (English original) … yes, in Spanish, the word is '*alguien*'.
[…]
Teacher: Next is '*hablar*', which means '*talk*' (English original), to talk.
[…]
Teacher: Let's try the phrase '*un poco de*'; we can say to add 'a little salt', '*un poco de sal*' …
Student: 'Salt' (English original).

What we see in the excerpt above is a typical interaction scenario where the teacher and the students code-switched among Chinese, Spanish and English to achieve a proper understanding of the word under discussion. The occasional use of English (i.e. 'somebody', 'talk' and 'salt') was found more spontaneous than elicited, probably because the students were familiar with the English language and would readily think of the English equivalent of a word when it was being introduced. The similarity in the sound and written form of some words between Spanish and English (e.g. '*sal*' versus 'salt') could also have prompted the students to make active associations of linguistic signs across systems.

5.3 Authentic behaviour and engagement

One great challenge of introducing a new language to beginners is for the language to have meaning in a personal sense, that is, for a foreign language to gain relevance to one's personal life despite the absence of that language in one's social surroundings. In the pre-class survey, the students reported early exposure to foreign languages (83 % of the students had been exposed to at least one foreign language before school started; roughly half had early exposure before 3 years of age). Except for one student who denied the use of foreign languages at home, roughly half of the students used English frequently, and the other half occasionally at home. This experience of using English in the family setting may not directly translate into one's authentic behaviour with Spanish, yet it served to naturalise learners' behaviour of using a foreign language in a monolingual society where the target language is inactive in social interactions. To some extent, the students' practices with English at home resemble the native-language learning situation where meaning-making occurs in sync with one's day-to-day experience. This practice of exposing young learners to foreign languages was found in a small number of families in previous studies (Li et al. 2022), which identified bilingual parents as one potent factor in predicting family language policies that encouraged children's multilingual development.

One student, Sebastián, was from a cross-cultural, multilingual family (his father was Indian, and his mother was Chinese). He was highly motivated to learn Spanish and was actively engaged in class. The teacher described his unique profile in one journal entry:

> Sebastián is a nice boy. He is quick to learn because he has got a very good foundation. He speaks English and Chinese fluently, and learning Spanish is like trying something new for a change. He has a different understanding of languages and has a different early experience because of his multilingual family. Compared with the other students, he seems more relaxed when speaking and more courageous in using the newly learnt words to express himself. It is perhaps due to the habit he developed from living with parents who habitually switch languages at home.

Living with multilingual parents allowed Sebastián to 'live' with languages that were generally foreign to the public. The noticeably stronger willingness and greater ease in his behaviour and engagement with the new language could be attributed to his lived experience with multiple languages, reducing the pressure of insisting on practising flawlessly with one language. His parents' habitual code-switching could also have influenced his perception of the reality of language in use, which featured flexibility and choice. Hence, learners like Sebastián may feel happy and ready to take the challenge of learning additional languages because their multilingual experiences have the potential to free their perception from the confinement of monolingual formulation and cultivate in them a nature of spontaneity, flexibility and adaptability, which enable them to ease their way into a new language. As they possibly see it, the perceived reality finds its articulation in multiple systems rather than in one single system and meaning-making is a heterogeneous process actively engaging linguistic signs across systems.

Sebastián was a somewhat special case due to his multilingual upbringing, yet other students also had their unique experiences with the language. During one class, the teacher played a video clip from a Spanish cartoon series. Elena, a girl whose father had the experience of working for a short time in Spain, reacted excitedly to this video because she had watched the cartoon before.

> I watched the cartoon when I was in third grade in primary school. It was fun to watch. My dad introduced it to me. We watched it together. He enjoyed it himself. (Elena, 8th grader)

Like Elena, Sofía also had a father with travelling experience to Spain. She described herself as being 'a shy girl and was not very active in school'. Rather than volunteering to answer questions or participating in activities, she preferred to 'sit quietly and watch others' in her regular classes. After the introductory class, the teacher asked the students to pick a Spanish name for themselves. The following week, Sofía went up to the teacher during class break and initiated a conversation:

> Sofía: I went back home and asked my dad. He said I had a Spanish equivalent of my Chinese name. So I decided to use this name.
>
> Teacher: Can your father speak Spanish?
>
> Sofía: Yes, a little. Very simple sentences. Because he once travelled to Spain on a business trip. Dad travels to different countries on business trips. And he would learn a bit of the language of the destination country every time he goes travelling. He has learnt a couple of languages this way. (Sofía, 7th grader)

Sofía became more active in class as she found herself a little more 'advanced' than her classmates. During the first class, after the introduction of the Spanish alphabet

and phonetics, the teacher asked the students whether they knew any Spanish. Most students had zero vocabulary in Spanish and shook their heads. Two or three students said they knew but one word, '*Hola*'. Sofía stunned everyone when she uttered a list of words, including '*Buenos días*', '*amigo*' and '*muchacha*'. She told the teacher afterwards that her father had taught her a few words and expressions in Spanish and that she was heavily influenced by her father to become interested in learning Spanish. As she put it, 'Dad is the first Spanish teacher' for her.

Although not every student in the class had a parent who knew Spanish or had travelled to Spanish-speaking countries, almost all students had parents with some sort of foreign language experience in cross-cultural communication (e.g. travelling to a foreign country, forging business relationships with overseas customers). On the one hand, professional experience with foreign languages on the part of young learners' parents could have shaped their decisions on the family's language learning investment for their children. On the other hand, their lived experiences could have exerted an indirect influence on their children's behaviour by serving as 'second-hand' sources of authenticity. They may have informed their children's practice with the new language by sharing with them their experience of working with foreign languages. By so doing, the learners could gain access to an imagined reality of the language and verify their imagination by learning it 'first-hand' in the classroom.

6 Conclusions

Authenticity is 'the way an individual sees themselves in relation to the various contexts in which they exist and are required to use language for the social production of meaning' (Lowe and Pinner 2016, p. 32). The semiotic analysis of the specific context of young learners' experiences with Spanish as an additional language opens our eyes to the possibilities of production of meaning in alternative social worlds constructed in forms less often discussed in the ELTL studies. The Interest Class Spanish as a low-pressure learning setting broke itself away from the conventional language classroom that subscribed to the 'teaching to the test' (Menken 2006) model, which tends to fossilise learning practices that place learners' experience with the 'form' (signifier) before that with the 'meaning' (signified) of the language, leading to inauthentic practices in the classroom. The active, authentic engagement observed in the study contrasts with the reticence and boredom previously reported in English classrooms (Pawlak et al. 2020). Activities that enabled meaning-making in a tangible, productive manner helped learners approach the new language without being intimidated by its alienness. The reality constructed multimodally in the innovative classroom facilitated the implementation of engaging

activities and created room for self-motivated exploration (Gurzynski-Weiss et al. 2015). The student-centred design of the class enabled meaning-focused learning to take place, which relaxed the students who tended to be overworked and stressed in their regular classes (Senior 2002). Similar to the unconventional cultural lesson on graffiti where learners were connected with the target culture via sensory experience (Calvin 2005), the teacher in the Interest Class drew from semiotic resources and learners' lived experiences to take the students on a journey into the Spanish language and culture.

Despite the limited evidence from one classroom, our analysis informs extensive enquiries for cross-contextual comparisons and further research looking into additional language classrooms through the looking glass of semiotics for a better understanding of authenticity and meaning-making processes in learners' experiences with a new language. With more technological support and policy affordances, we expect innovative ways of teaching to emerge in the future to develop LOTE interest and competence in learners to diversify and enrich their language experiences (Block 2010).

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