

The Integration of Cultural Courses in Higher Education: Enhancing Intercultural Awareness Among English Learners

Ma Na

Liaoning University of International Business and Economics, Dalian, Liaoning, China

Abstract: *Language and culture are closely related with each other. Foreign language learning is in fact cultural learning. In order to learn a foreign language well, one has to understand the TL culture, especially the differences between the SL culture and TL culture. Therefore, foreign language teaching is not just training in such basic skills as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. Most important of all is to conduct cultural teaching so as to enable students to understand the TL cultural background and enhance their cross-cultural awareness. Developing students' cross-cultural awareness will help them to have a better mastery and use of English and realize that learning English is also learning culture at the same time. Only in this way can they master the language in the real sense. Otherwise, what they learn would be neither English nor Chinese. Through comparative analyses of the relation between language and culture and the common types of cultural differences between Chinese and English in English language learning. This paper expounds the importance of cross-cultural awareness in English teaching, analyzes the problems existing in present cross-cultural teaching and learning, summarizes a series of basic goals and basic contents of developing cross-cultural awareness, and proposes some effective methods as well as some principles to be observed.*

Keywords: Cross-cultural Awareness, Effective, ELT.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Since the successful convening of international events such as APEC, SCO, the international community's understanding and desire for China have become increasingly strong. How to broaden the pace of international exchanges has become a key issue for the next two decades. The role of English learners will become crucial; based on language use, achieving effective cross-cultural communication is a significant practical challenge faced by English teaching.

Language use involves at least two sets of rules: one is structural rules, i.e., the organizational form of language; the other is usage rules, which are various factors determining whether the use of language is appropriate. A sentence that perfectly conforms to grammatical rules, when used in different contexts, may not achieve the purpose of communication if it does not match the speaker's identity or violates local social customs and habits. Even if the structural rules are correct, ignoring usage rules can sometimes lead to unexpected consequences. In a certain sense, language is form, and culture is content. Learning English cannot be separated from English culture, which serves as the foundation for using English accurately and appropriately. Therefore, in language learning, it is essential to organize it from a cultural perspective, understand its usage context, master its usage rules, and thus infuse language with acquired culture. Otherwise, one cannot truly master the language.

The relationship between language and culture has always been an area of concern and study for anthropologists and linguists. Western scholars have conducted extensive research in this field. Contemporary renowned linguist and representative figure of the London School of Linguistics, Halliday (1978), believes that language is part of a social system, a potential meaning system (meaning potential)

composed of phonological systems, vocabulary, grammatical systems, and semantic systems, with "realization" relationships existing among these levels. Thus, lexical relations are realized through phonology, and semantics realize culture. Language, as an important carrier of culture, is one of the critical means reflecting culture. A nation's language often embodies various aspects of its social and cultural life. As the famous British anthropologist Malinowski said, a language is fundamentally rooted in the culture, social life, and customs of its people (C.K. 奥格登, I.A. 理查兹 2000).

In an era characterized by intensified globalization and increasingly frequent international interaction, linguistic competence alone is no longer sufficient as a measure of English language learners' overall proficiency. Over the past decade, intercultural awareness (IA)—a central component of intercultural communicative competence (ICC)—has gained substantial recognition within both academic and pedagogical discourse. As a result, the integration of intercultural dimensions into English language instruction has emerged as a key area of inquiry in applied linguistics and foreign language education.

Recent scholarship reflects a notable shift in focus—from theoretical conceptualizations of "cultural awareness" toward more nuanced, context-sensitive, and pedagogically actionable frameworks. Three interrelated trends have come to define the current survey of research and practice:

1) From Cultural Knowledge to Integrated Cultural Competence

Early approaches to culture in language teaching predominantly emphasized the transmission of static, fact-based cultural knowledge—such as historical events, geographical facts, and social customs of English-speaking countries. However, contemporary research advocates a more

holistic understanding of intercultural awareness, one that extends beyond cognitive recognition of cultural differences. Current perspectives position IA as a multidimensional construct encompassing not only knowledge but also skills, attitudes, and critical awareness. As highlighted in recent studies, effective intercultural communication requires learners to interpret and negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries, while cultivating openness, empathy, and reflective judgment. (李漳晴, 祁文慧 2023) This paradigmatic shift signifies a move from a content-driven model (“knowing about culture”) to a process-oriented approach centered on “how to interact” and “how to reflect” in intercultural contexts.

2) The Emergence of Critical Cultural Awareness

Parallel to this reconceptualization is a growing emphasis on criticality in intercultural learning. Rather than promoting superficial cultural comparisons—such as contrasting festivals, cuisines, or etiquette—recent scholarship calls for a deeper, more critical engagement with cultural phenomena. Critical cultural awareness (CCA) challenges learners to deconstruct cultural stereotypes, recognize the internal diversity and fluidity of cultures, and interrogate asymmetrical power relations embedded in cultural representations. It also encourages reflection on one’s own cultural positioning and the dynamic processes of identity formation in a globalized world. By fostering an understanding of cultural hybridity and transcultural identities, CCA transforms intercultural education from a descriptive, exoticizing endeavor into a transformative practice aimed at cultivating ethical intercultural citizenship.

3) Rebalancing Local and Global Cultural Identities

A third significant development is the increasing recognition of bidirectionality in intercultural communication. Effective ICC is not merely about adapting to or understanding the target culture; it also involves the ability to represent one’s own cultural heritage articulately and authentically in intercultural exchanges. This has led to a pedagogical emphasis on “cultural output”—the capacity to communicate local, national, and regional cultural narratives to global audiences through English. Consequently, contemporary curricula increasingly integrate content that enables learners to “tell Chinese stories well” in English, thereby fostering cultural confidence and agency. This dual focus on cultural reception and cultural expression reflects a more equitable and reciprocal model of intercultural exchange.

Collectively, these trends underscore a maturation of the field: intercultural awareness is no longer treated as a peripheral or supplementary aspect of language learning, but as an essential, integrated dimension of communicative competence. Moving forward, curriculum design, teacher education, and assessment practices must continue to evolve to reflect this expanded, critical, and dialogic understanding of culture in language education.

Adding courses on English and American cultural background knowledge into the syllabus of specialized English courses can effectively enhance English learners' awareness of English culture. This article uses linguistic statistical methods,

specifically paired-sample T-tests, to examine changes in research subjects before and after the implementation of experiments, assessing the necessity and effectiveness of setting up cultural courses in enhancing English learners' cultural awareness. This study combines curriculum design and test composition to analyze the facilitative role of cultural course teaching in improving English learners' cross-cultural awareness.

1.2 Research Questions

The main research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

- What is the current state of cross-cultural awareness among English language learners?
- Through what primary channels do English language learners acquire cultural knowledge?
- What differences are exhibited by English language learners before and after instruction in cultural courses?
- How can an effective theoretical framework and set of strategies be established to enhance cross-cultural awareness?

2. Project Design

Malinowski (1935) argued that language is “embedded in the fabric of social action.” Subsequent empirical work (Byram, 2021) operationalized CCA as a composite of knowledge (K), attitude (A), skills (S), and awareness (A)—the KASA model adopted herein.

A single-group pre-test/post-test design was employed over 16 weeks. Ethical approval was obtained; informed consent was secured. When establishing course content and objectives, in addition to language skills and language knowledge, elements such as affect, learning strategies, and culture are also incorporated. The curriculum emphasizes that cultural awareness is essential for the appropriate use of language—an innovative approach in the history of English language education. The researcher designed a course syllabus, selected participants, and developed cultural proficiency tests and questionnaires to examine whether offering cultural courses within university programs effectively enhances learners' cross-cultural awareness.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

120 freshmen (female = 78, male = 42; age $M = 18.4$, $SD = 0.6$) enrolled in the second semester of 2023–2024.

3.2 Instruments

3.3 Cross-Cultural Awareness Test (CCAT)

40 MC items ($\alpha = .84$) mapping onto KASA domains.

5-point Likert questionnaire (20 items, $\alpha = .81$) probing sources and attitudes.

Semi-structured interviews (n = 12) for qualitative depth.

Cultural background knowledge plays a significant role in improving English learners' language acquisition. In the process of English language instruction, learners often encounter obstacles due to a lack of sufficient cultural background knowledge. The purpose of this course is to enable students to understand the historical and cultural context of the Western world, particularly the history and culture of the United Kingdom and the United States.

3.4 Intervention: Course Design

Course Title: Introduction to British and American Culture

This course offers a critical and comparative exploration of the cultural landscapes of major English-speaking countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Rather than presenting culture as a static set of facts, the course emphasizes culture as dynamic, contested, and interconnected. Students will examine historical developments, social institutions, values, identities, and global influences, while developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Special attention is given to power, diversity, migration, and postcolonial legacies. The course also fosters students' ability to represent Chinese culture in English, promoting bidirectional intercultural exchange. By the end of this course, students will be able to:

Demonstrate knowledge of key historical, political, and social developments in major English-speaking countries.

Analyze cultural phenomena through critical frameworks, avoiding stereotypes and essentialism.

Compare and contrast cultural values and practices across English-speaking societies and with Chinese culture.

Develop intercultural awareness by reflecting on their own cultural identities and biases.

Communicate cultural insights effectively in English, both orally and in writing.

Articulate aspects of Chinese culture to international audiences using English as a lingua franca.

Hours: 1 h/week lecture + 0.5 h/week seminar × 16 weeks.

Content: historical milestones, value orientations, non-verbal norms, pop-culture case studies.

Pedagogy: flipped mini-lectures, drama-based role-play. Teaching and learning methods include interactive lectures with conceptual input with multimedia support (videos, podcasts, images), seminars and discussions by student-led dialogues on controversial or complex topics, case studies and simulations: real-world scenarios to practice intercultural judgment, project-based learning with long-term assignments fostering research and creativity, reflective journals as weekly entries to track personal intercultural growth.

Assessment: in detailed assessment scheme as followed:

Component	Weight	Description
Participation & Discussion	15%	Active engagement in class activities, discussions, and peer feedback
Reflective Journal	15%	10 entries (300–500 words each), demonstrating critical self-reflection
Midterm Project	25%	Research-based presentation (10 mins) + 1000-word paper on a cultural topic (e.g., “The Evolution of Thanksgiving”)
Final Project	35%	“Cultural Bridge” project: Create a multilingual (English + Chinese) digital portfolio, video, or podcast that introduces an aspect of Chinese culture to an English-speaking audience
Quizzes	15%	3 short quizzes (Weeks 3, 7, 11) testing key concepts and cultural facts

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Analysis of Differences in Test Results

According to the teaching schedule, the researcher randomly selected 120 samples, consisting of freshmen majoring in English at Liaoning University of International Business and Economics from the class of 2023. At the beginning of the second semester after their enrollment, these 120 students were given a questionnaire survey and a test, followed by data collection and archiving. After the cultural teaching ended in the second semester, the same questionnaires and tests were distributed again to collect and archive the data. The SPSS11.0 software was used to conduct paired-sample t-tests on the test results, with the following outcomes:

Table 1: Paired-Sample T-Test for Cultural Proficiency Test

Number of Variables	2-tailed pairs	Corr.	Sig.	Mean.	SD.	SE of Mean
Pre-teaching	120	0.114	0.214	54.833	15.507	1.416
Post-teaching				72.750	14.343	1.309

From Table 1, we can see the statistical data of students' scores before and after cultural teaching. This example includes 120 pairs of observations, with a correlation coefficient (C) of 0.114. The significance test of the correlation coefficient indicates p = 0.214. Before cultural teaching, the mean, standard deviation, and standard error were 54.833, 15.507, and 1.416 respectively. After cultural teaching, these values were 72.750, 14.343, and 1.309 respectively.

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig (2-tailed)...
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pre- / post-teaching	-17.9167	22.29466	2.03521	-21.9466	-13.8867	-8.803	119	.000

This result shows that the mean difference, standard deviation, standard error, and 95% confidence interval between pre- and post-teaching are -17.9167, 22.29466, 2.03521, and (-21.9466, -13.8867) respectively. The paired t-test result is: t = -8.803, p = .000, indicating a significant difference. Thus, cultural

teaching has a significant impact on enhancing learners' cross-cultural awareness.

4.2 Analysis of Differences in Survey Results

After completing the pre-teaching questionnaire survey, it was found that regarding the role of cross-cultural awareness (items 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8), 43.2% believed that cultural knowledge helps improve English learning; 28.3% thought that although cultural knowledge aids English learning, it only constitutes a minor part in various exams; 20% believed that mastering cultural knowledge has no effect on English learning; and 8.5% felt that studying culture and enhancing cross-cultural awareness is a waste of time. After cultural teaching, 80% recognized the importance of cultural learning and increased their interest in English through cultural studies. However, 17% still believed that focusing on traditional cultural learning might lead to cultural stereotypes, posing new challenges for understanding English-speaking cultures. Only 3% remained skeptical about cultural learning, arguing that one could perceive culture during language use without specifically studying it.

67.4% of the students reported initial misunderstandings or difficulties when communicating with foreigners, which 61.2% attributed to a lack of cultural background knowledge. After a semester of cultural immersion and teaching, 80% of students could communicate smoothly with foreign teachers and summarize experiences. Regarding the sources of cultural knowledge, 30.3% learned through teacher explanations, 13.7% through textbooks, newspapers, and magazines, 20% through daily interactions, and 36% through Western media. During cultural teaching, teachers utilized multimedia and electronic technology to transmit vivid cultural content to students. Under teacher guidance, students increased their reliance on journals, magazines, media, and daily interactions, enhancing their curiosity and motivation for language learning. These findings indicate that cultural teaching effectively enhances English learners' cross-cultural awareness.

5. Outcome

Based on the analysis of the investigation, we can draw the following conclusion:

The students have not realized the importance of cultural teaching, and they have not grasped enough cultural knowledge so that they have some difficulties in communication in English.

Students' cross-cultural awareness is rather poor and it influences their cultural learning and the developing of cross-cultural communication competence. Thus developing students' cross-cultural awareness is a current task for English teachers in universities.

Teachers' lecture in class have not obvious influences on acquiring cultural knowledge, whole films, TV and interactivities play more important roles in acquiring cultural background information. The practice in target cultural context is a key for Chinese English learners' acquisition of cultural knowledge and cross-cultural awareness, but it has been neglected.

The results after questionnaire show that the average level of teaching staff is far away from the qualified or satisfactory requirements. The majority of Chinese teachers of English need be assigned the task of conveying culture of English-speaking countries and trained in foreign culture learning.

Teachers' cultural awareness plays an important role in cultural teaching. Advanced studied abroad, short-term training or periodical seminars on British and American culture should be carried. It may enable English teachers to obtain a fairly systematic understanding of cultural knowledge.

The main methods of cultural input are not satisfactory. The means of teaching culture is still based on teacher-center and grammar-center. There is a blank in teachers' teaching plan as how to do the cultural convey due to the less systematic reference materials and limitation of teaching period. Some of the textbooks need to be written.

6. Conclusion

6.1 General Findings

Practical suggestions for practice of cultivating cultural awareness are suggested from three perspectives.

First, suggestions are collected from the educational technique perspective—curriculum & teaching materials. The national syllabus for English majors falls into two sub-syllabi: Syllabus for Basic English Stage and Syllabus for Advanced English Stage. The former stipulates that undergraduates should receive a strict and all-sided training in basic teachers call for more background information in Teachers' book. Even though A New English Course has covered many aspects of English speaking nations, the study indicates that cultural information is included but not dwelt on nor systemized. Given that NEC is observed as one of the best intensive reading textbook, what students can learn from intensive reading with regard to intercultural awareness is far from adequate. Textbook writing and revising has been of top priority in field of foreign language education in China. The teaching of English is different from other subjects in the school curriculum. The teachers often have students see the films, spare television, video, plays and even the internet in their spare time, thus these will play a partner-role in the major textbooks focusing on culture teaching such as In Introduction to European Culture, etc. In teaching and learning languages, curriculum is one of the important elements to take into consideration. The present English teaching curriculum for college English majors has no exact requirement of culture teaching, or it only regards culture teaching as a supplementary means to develop EFL learners' linguistic competence. In order to break with quite a few conventions of traditional foreign language teaching methodology and open up vast vistas for the development of EFL learners' competence to use English correctly, fluently and appropriately in their future cross-cultural communication, the treating of socio-cultural competence should be made as an educational objective.

Integrating cultural knowledge into foreign language teaching must be stated in the curriculum. Naturally, the consideration of socio-cultural competence as an educational objective follows the increase of EFL learners' cultural awareness. Thus, teaching English as a foreign language in a non-native context, like China, can be effectively developed.

Selecting appropriate materials used to cultivate EFL learners' cultural awareness is vital. Some educators think that it is all right to select from textbooks nowadays popularly applied in EFL teaching, some insist on introducing authentic materials from countries of the target language, and others advocate compiling a series of full-of-Chinese-characteristic textbooks taking culture in account. It is believed to be a good suggestion that textbook writing or compiling should be approached from a cultural perspective.

Traditionally, textbooks applied in EFL teaching and learning concern too much on linguistic form, including vocabulary, grammar, and sentence patterns, etc. the tide of teaching and learning culture promotes the development of textbooks used in FLT to pay more attention to cultural factors. Textbook writers should be aware that integrating culture, as a new element into the textbook is a matter of content selection and organization, not a matter of increasing teaching hours. Moreover, it must be emphasized that textbooks concerning teaching and learning foreign cultures should be written or compiled according to the principle of "discarding the dross and selecting the essence." Textbooks of such kind are labeled with more Chinese characteristics and adopted by more Chinese EFL learners.

As the integration of Chinese and foreign cultures has been the main tendency of the society nowadays, the acquisition of foreign cultures is of great importance. Courses of foreign cultures are set up in quick succession at colleges. An Introduction to Britain and America, History of British Literature, and History of American Literature are the common courses offered to college English majors. For postgraduates, socio-linguistics, pragmatics, cultural linguistics, and communication between cultures are offered.

It is proved that teaching and learning foreign cultures might be paid extraordinarily more attention while Chinese culture cannot be forgotten in the process of cultivating EFL learners' cultural awareness. It is inappropriate of both blindly excluding and rejecting Chinese culture and completely introducing and absorbing foreign cultures. China is an ancient country with a long history and there is much quintessence in Chinese culture. Enlightened by this point of view, Chinese Culture must be made required and corresponding courses like Chinese History of Chinese Literature should be offered as elective ones.

In addition, courses related with cultural comparison are good trials to give learners more chances to enlarge their cultural knowledge and increase their cultural competence in comparing Chinese with foreign cultures. Courses like Comparative Literature or Issues in Chinese and Western Philosophies can be taught in a form of seminar.

Second, suggestions are given from the educational subjective perspective---teachers. To cultivate EFL learners' cultural

awareness in foreign language education makes high demands on the teachers themselves. EFL teachers should "strive to be bicultural or at least familiar with the target culture". If possible, they should be provided with an opportunity to be trained in the country of the target language so as to have a period of total exposure to the culture. At the same time, they themselves should use every means available to enlarge their knowledge of the country and the people and familiarize themselves with the customs and habits, rites and rituals, ways of living, and interpersonal behavior, etc.

In reality, not all the teachers have the opportunity of being trained to be bicultural in the country of the target language. Thus, teachers should be conscious of their conditions and try to make a good use of every means available to widen their cultural horizon and deepen their cultural understanding. Meanwhile, teachers should have the ability to show a number of different cultural outlooks and perspectives and help the learners analyze fundamental cultural aspects. Simply speaking, EFL teachers must try to improve themselves to fit them into the new requirement of cultivating learners' cultural awareness in foreign language education.

The teacher should emphasize that students mustn't regard literature in films and on TV as the appreciation of the literature works. They must deal well with the relation between the cultural understanding and the appreciation of the literature works. Before class, teachers asked the students to observe and make notes about nonverbal communication such as the time language, space language, body language, voice modulation and environment to indulge themselves into the whole works. And it is proved that such a new kind of method really helps the students to develop their cross-cultural awareness.

It is necessary to construct cultural testing and evaluating system. Just as teachers evaluate learners' language learning, evaluation of their culture learning provides them with important feedback and keeps teachers accountable in EFL teaching. Currently in China, culture-learning assessment has always been neglected in foreign language education. If teachers want to enable learners to truly understand foreign cultures, the testing a devaluating system of the target culture must be developed. Learners can profit from this aspect of their foreign language classes.

Third, suggestions are taken from the educational objective perspective --- the learners. When cultivating EFL learners' cultural awareness, teachers usually do more work on understanding the target culture rather than guiding them to appreciate the native culture. In fact, to cultivate learners' cultural awareness in the process of EFL teaching and learning does not mean to change their value orientations or customs, and even persuade them to mold their personal behaviors on native speakers. Instead, both teachers and learners of foreign languages should appreciate their home culture. They have the responsibility to disseminate their home culture to the world while teaching and learning foreign cultures.

Now, since qualification education has been established as the final goal of modern Chinese students, students are required to develop comprehensive ability and multi-interests. In

universities, students must realize knowing language forms alone is inadequate for the need of cross-cultural communication. They should learn to be independent learners and gradually take active role in English study. Not limiting themselves inside classroom, they should read widely in their spare time to acquaint themselves with English cultural background information, and try every way to obtain cross-cultural experience. The experience of reading authentic English books and seeing English films has two advantages. First, students can become affectively as well as cognitively involved in the experience of complexities of English culture in ways that teachers' "anecdotes" cannot stimulate. Secondly, the complexities of cross-cultural awareness can be presented in the details of daily life.

Therefore, EFL teaching and learning should lead to a better understanding of and insight into the native culture. Appreciation of and sensitivity to one's own culture should be established when learning foreign cultures. So, EFL learners must be provided with the necessary linguistic, communicative and cross-cultural skills to express themselves, to portray their own society, and to present their native culture in the target language. It is worthwhile trying to organize various contents about Chinese culture in a consistent framework, provide learners with different theories and concepts, and create an environment for them to ponder on these various theories and concepts and critically evaluate them. In this way, EFL learners may have a comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture. Thus, their appreciation of home culture is raised in foreign language and culture learning.

To sum up, this chapter focuses on the development of the conceptual framework of cultivating EFL learners' cultural awareness in foreign language education. With the goals, principles and contents of cultural awareness cultivation are respectively defined, three procedures are: (1) to start with understanding cultural differences, (2) to teach the target culture while teaching the language, and (3) to cultivate cultural competence in communication. Thus, a system of cultivating EFL learners' cultural awareness is established. It is worth noting that this is only constructed from the conceptual perspective and needs putting into practice.

6.2 Limitation

As far as the limitations are concerned, this study pays more attention to theoretical construction rather than practical application. On the one hand, some proposals put forward are still at the theoretical stage and distant from skillful implementation in practice. On the other hand, the research, especially the design and conduction of the two questionnaires, remains unscientific. Anyway, the research is done full of care and responsibility. Both the theoretical construction and the practical implementation are expected to sufficiently and clearly state the researcher's points of view on how to effectively cultivate EFL learners' cultural awareness in foreign language education.

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