

Cultivating Intercultural Awareness in Chinese High School English Education

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how English teachers in Z High School perceive and implement intercultural awareness cultivation in bilingual classroom settings and examines how non-participant classroom observations reflect teachers' practical teaching practices in promoting students' intercultural awareness. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research collected data through semi-structured interviews with three English teachers and non-participant classroom observations. Findings indicate that while teachers recognize the importance of intercultural awareness and integrate cultural elements through diverse strategies—including rhetorical means, experiential learning, and peer reviews—their efforts are constrained by the exam-oriented education system, limited instructional time, and students' varying language proficiency. Classroom observations further reveal disparities in student engagement, with more interactive and critical-thinking-based lessons yielding higher participation. The study highlights the gap between national curriculum expectations and practical classroom realities, underscoring the need for flexible curriculum design, improved teacher training, and assessment reforms. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators seeking to enhance intercultural education in Chinese EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Intercultural Awareness, English Education, Teachers' Perspectives, Classroom Practices, Non-Participant Observation, Chinese EFL Context

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, globalization has strengthened English's role as an international lingua franca, emphasizing communicative competence in multilingual settings (Hu, 2013; Matsuda, 2017). Traditionally, English teaching in China prioritized grammar and vocabulary to boost exam performance (Sun, 2017; Jing, 2023). However, intercultural communication skills are now crucial for navigating multicultural environments. Consequently, education reform urges teachers to integrate language and cultural teaching to enhance both proficiency and intercultural competence (Zheng, 2012; Sun, 2017 ; He, 2024).

Recognizing this shift, China's High School English Curriculum Standards (2017, revised 2020) highlight intercultural awareness as a core educational component. The framework categorizes intercultural awareness into three dimensions: cognition, emotion, and behavior. Cognition involves understanding cultural knowledge, including historical contexts and social norms. Emotion fosters an open, respectful attitude toward other cultures while maintaining cultural confidence. Behavior refers to applying this knowledge in intercultural interactions, demonstrating linguistic appropriateness and sensitivity to verbal and non-verbal cues.

While intercultural awareness (IA) is a key focus in the Chinese educational system, it is important to distinguish this concept from intercultural competence (ICC). Intercultural competence encompasses not only knowledge and attitudes but also the skills necessary for effective intercultural communication, including adaptability and conflict resolution (Byram, 1997). However, in the context of China's high school English

education, where students are still at the early stages of language acquisition, it is more feasible and appropriate to focus on cultivating intercultural awareness (IA). IA focuses on understanding and appreciating cultural differences, laying the foundation for future intercultural communication skills. Given that ICC requires higher levels of language proficiency and practical communication experience, it may be better addressed at later stages of language education.

This study applies the framework provided by the High School English Curriculum Standards (2017) to examine how high school English teachers in China integrate intercultural awareness into their teaching practices. By analyzing teachers' perspectives and classroom strategies, this study assesses whether current pedagogical approaches align with national policy expectations and identifies key challenges limiting their effectiveness. Furthermore, it explores why cultivating intercultural awareness (IA), rather than intercultural competence (ICC), is the most appropriate starting point for high school students in China's English education system.

Research Questions:

- How do English teachers at Z High School perceive, implement, and navigate challenges in cultivating intercultural awareness in bilingual classrooms?
- How do non-participant classroom observations reflect teachers' actual practices and challenges in fostering intercultural awareness?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Awareness vs. Intercultural Competence: A Conceptual Distinction

In recent discussions on intercultural education, it is crucial to distinguish between Intercultural Awareness (IA) and Intercultural Competence (ICC), as these concepts serve different roles in language teaching. While both are essential in fostering effective cross-cultural communication, they vary in their focus and application.

Intercultural Awareness (IA), as defined by Hanvey (1979), refers to the understanding, respect, and sensitivity toward cultural differences. IA encompasses the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of cultural understanding, including cultural knowledge (e.g., history, social norms) and attitudes (e.g., openness, respect). The primary goal of IA is to help individuals recognize and appreciate cultural diversity, which lays the foundation for meaningful intercultural interactions (Byram, 1997). It is foundational in developing cultural empathy and awareness, crucial for engaging in intercultural communication.

Intercultural Competence (ICC), on the other hand, goes beyond awareness and involves the practical ability to communicate and interact effectively across cultures. According to Byram (1997), ICC includes cultural knowledge and attitudes but also incorporates the skills necessary for effective communication in diverse multicultural settings. These skills include adaptability, conflict resolution, and the ability to negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries. While ICC is essential for real-world intercultural interactions, it typically requires advanced language proficiency and more extensive cross-cultural experience (Chen, 1989).

For this study, the focus is on Intercultural Awareness (IA) rather than Intercultural Competence (ICC), due to several factors within the context of Chinese high school English education. Many high school students in China are at an early stage of language learning, and their proficiency levels often do not support the complex communication skills needed for developing ICC. As IA focuses on cultural understanding and attitudes, it is more appropriate for students who are still developing their language proficiency.

Moreover, the exam-oriented nature of the Chinese education system poses a significant challenge to the integration of ICC, as standardized testing places a higher emphasis on grammar, reading, and writing rather than interactive skills required for ICC development. In contrast, IA can be cultivated through relatively simpler cultural activities, discussions, and exposure to cultural knowledge that do not demand advanced

language skills. This makes IA a more feasible and practical educational goal in the context of high school classrooms. Therefore, Intercultural Awareness (IA) is a crucial first step for students, providing a foundational understanding that can later evolve into Intercultural Competence (ICC) as students' language skills and intercultural experiences mature.

Intercultural Awareness in the High School English Curriculum Standards

Hanvey (1979) introduced the concept of "intercultural awareness," which is pivotal for understanding both one's own and other cultures' superficial and deep traits. This comprehensive awareness entails recognizing, cognitively appreciating, and empathizing with cultural differences. The revised "High School English Curriculum Standards" (2017, revised in 2020) in China align closely with these ideas, emphasizing intercultural communication awareness as a crucial educational component. The standards identify three core aspects of intercultural awareness, as shown in figure 1:

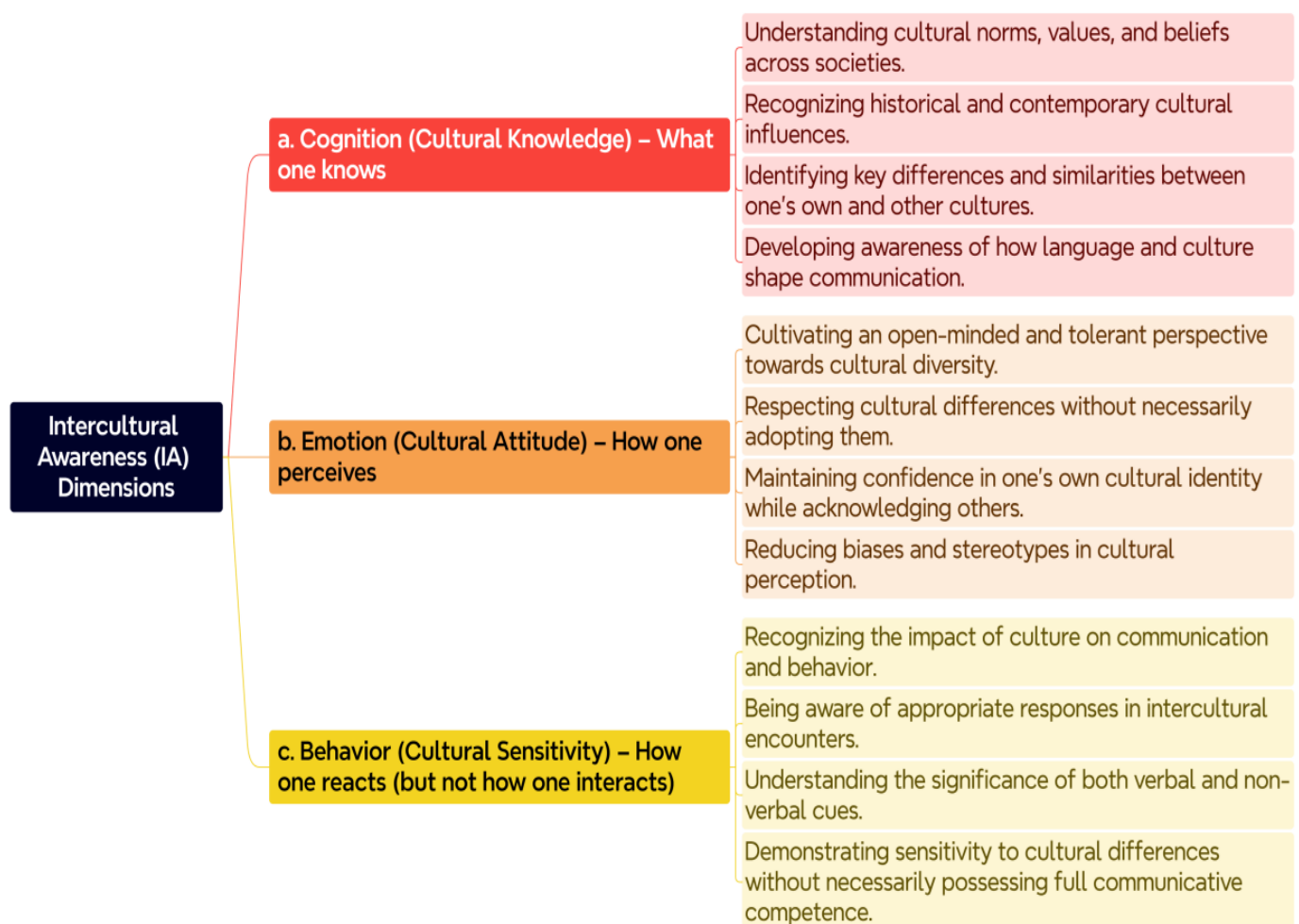


Figure 1 Intercultural Awareness Dimensions

Unlike traditional models of Intercultural Competence (ICC), which emphasize the ability to interact effectively in multicultural settings, the Chinese high school curriculum prioritizes cultural perception and identity as part of a broader global competence framework. This ensures that students not only understand global cultures but also maintain a strong sense of national cultural identity in cross-cultural exchanges.

By adopting the High School English Curriculum Standards (2017, 2020) framework, this study evaluates how English teachers integrate IA into their teaching practices. The goal is to assess whether current pedagogical approaches align with curriculum expectations and to explore the challenges and opportunities in fostering IA within the constraints of China's exam-driven education system.

Intercultural Awareness Goals Changes in the Curriculum Standards Over Time

The progression of the curriculum standards has been significant in shifting the focus from mere knowledge transmission to developing robust intercultural communication skills, as shown in table 1:

Table 1: Evolution of Intercultural Awareness Goals in Curriculum Standards

| Year | Intercultural Awareness Goals |
|------|---|
| 2003 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Understand common English idioms and their cultural connotations. 1 Understand the experiences, achievements, and contributions of major writers, artists, and scientists from English-speaking countries, as well as their political and economic aspects. 1 Understand the major media, lifestyles, and customs of people in English-speaking countries. |
| 2012 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 On the basis of the 2003 period, an understanding of daily life, behavior patterns, and major events and social customs in English-speaking countries was added |
| 2017 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Ability to choose appropriate ways to obtain cultural information in practical situations, such as the classroom, while respecting and understanding cultural diversity and developing an international perspective. 1 Understand and appreciate the content of foreign cultures, cultivating cross-cultural awareness, and perceiving the spiritual essence of excellent cultures to establish correct values. 1 Appreciate the language and artistic beauty of foreign cultures, while developing the consciousness and ability to promote China's unique social culture. |

As can be seen from the above, the revised "High School English Curriculum Standards" in China fundamentally transform the educational focus from mere knowledge acquisition to developing sound intercultural communication skills, preparing students to effectively navigate and contribute to a globalized world. These standards not only enhance students' ability to understand and engage with diverse cultural perspectives but also encourage them to advocate for their own cultural heritage, balancing global integration with cultural identity.

This shift aims to cultivate future students who are equipped not just with linguistic proficiency but also with critical intercultural competencies necessary for fostering international collaboration and innovation. By embedding these skills into the curriculum, the standards set the stage for students to become active creators in a multicultural global environment, promoting a deeper, more inclusive global dialogue.

The importance of intercultural awareness in EFL teaching

In the context of globalization, intercultural awareness has become a key element in foreign language teaching, with a focus shifting from merely teaching grammar and vocabulary to developing students' cross-cultural communication skills (Byram, 2020). However, traditional EFL teaching in China still emphasizes grammar and exam preparation, which, while effective for achieving high scores, results in limited communicative competence and a lack of necessary cultural knowledge (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). This exam-oriented system leads teachers to prioritize content that boosts exam performance, neglecting the development of cross-cultural communication abilities (Wang, 2017). As a result, many students, despite their strong language skills, struggle in real-life communication with foreigners due to insufficient cultural understanding, often leading to misunderstandings and conflicts (Ilie, 2019; Zhang & Zhou, 2021). To address the challenges of globalization, many experts advocate integrating intercultural awareness into English teaching. Zheng (2012) and Sun (2017) highlight that cross-cultural education not only enhances language skills but also fosters a global perspective and strong values. Improving students' cross-cultural communication abilities involves teaching cultural background knowledge, organizing exchange activities, and using diverse materials. Educational reform should focus on both changing teaching methods and revising evaluation systems to prioritize students' comprehensive skills over test scores. In light of globalization, it is increasingly necessary to emphasize cross-cultural awareness in English teaching, enhancing students' communication abilities through innovative methods to prepare them for success in a multicultural world.

Integrating Culture into English Language Teaching: Historical Evolution and Contemporary Approaches

The integration of culture into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has long been recognized as a critical aspect of language learning. Scholars emphasize that language learning is incomplete without understanding the target culture, as cultural competence enhances communicative ability and fosters a deeper connection to language (Nazari, 2007). Over time, the field of intercultural communication has evolved significantly, reflecting shifts in language teaching practices.

Edward T. Hall (1959) laid the foundation for understanding the impact of culture on communication with his introduction of *The Silent Language*. Hall's theory emphasized the importance of non-verbal communication and the cultural values that shape interactions. Dell Hymes (1972) expanded on this by asserting that true communication extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include cultural contexts. Hymes introduced the concept of "communicative interference," describing misunderstandings that occur when native language habits are transferred to intercultural exchanges. M.A.K. Halliday (1978) further advanced this idea by advocating for a communicative approach in language education, wherein language is viewed as a social instrument intertwined with cultural elements. This shift underscored the importance of incorporating cultural understanding into language teaching and laid the groundwork for the recognition of cultural competence as a key element of effective communication.

Chen (1989) later articulated that intercultural competence involves not only communicative skills but also psychological adaptation and deep cultural awareness. Chen's work highlighted the psychological aspects of intercultural communication, stressing that a profound understanding of cultural contexts is essential for successful interaction. Similarly, Norma Wolfson (1990) pointed out that breaches in cultural norms, rather than linguistic errors, often lead to perceptions of impoliteness, thus emphasizing the importance of cultural understanding in communication.

In contemporary scholarship, scholars have continued to advocate for the integration of culture into EFL teaching. Balcaen (1985) proposed enhancing cultural awareness by integrating cultural behaviors into language instruction, emphasizing the role of culture in shaping communication. Carter and Long (1991) suggested using cultural texts to promote an appreciation of cultural differences and navigate diverse ideologies. Gao (2006) introduced two approaches: one that focuses on transmitting static cultural knowledge, and another that encourages the development of a multi-perspective view that includes both native and non-native English-speaking countries.

McKay (2003) underscored the importance of considering both language and culture in EFL teaching, advocating for authentic, two-way communication between teachers and students. In contrast, Halliday (2007) and Baker (2012) argued that EFL teaching should prioritize understanding cultural communication practices rather than focusing solely on native English-speaking cultures. They highlighted the role of English as a lingua franca in facilitating global communication. Sun (2017) also emphasized the importance of integrating intercultural education with language learning to foster critical thinking and intercultural competence.

However, in the context of China, intercultural education still tends to focus on understanding the culture of the target language country and comparing it with the local culture. This approach places considerable pressure on teachers, requiring them to become "dual-culture educators." As a result, much more effort is needed to overcome these challenges. Given the current state of English education in China, where an exam-oriented education system dominates and language proficiency is often limited, the development of Intercultural Awareness (IA), rather than Intercultural Competence (ICC), is more appropriate. IA serves as a critical first step, focusing on understanding and appreciating cultural differences, which aligns with the goals of China's English curriculum. Furthermore, fostering IA provides a foundation upon which ICC can later be developed as students advance in their language skills and gain more intercultural experiences.

This shift towards Intercultural Awareness (IA) is not only more feasible within the current educational context but also aligns with the broader goals of the national curriculum reforms, which aim to develop students'

intercultural understanding and respect for cultural diversity. As students' language skills mature, they can gradually build upon this foundation to develop the more advanced skills required for Intercultural Competence (ICC). Therefore, the integration of IA into high school English education provides a pragmatic approach to preparing students for global citizenship while considering the realities of the Chinese educational system.

METHODOLOGY

A case study approach was adopted in this research to explore the cultivation of intercultural awareness in high school English education, as it provides an effective means of investigating complex social phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2014). The study was conducted at Zhuhai Z Middle School, a first-tier high school in Guangdong Province recognized for its proactive engagement in educational reform and curriculum innovation. This setting was selected to gain a deeper understanding of how intercultural awareness is integrated into English classrooms.

To achieve a comprehensive perspective, qualitative methods were employed, including semi-structured interviews with three English teachers and non-participant classroom observations. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for capturing participants' experiences and perspectives, offering in-depth insights that quantitative methods may overlook (Holloway & Galvin, 2023). Furthermore, as Johnson (2017) emphasizes, qualitative case studies are especially useful in underexplored research areas, allowing for a richer exploration of specific educational practices. By integrating data from multiple sources—including teacher interviews and classroom observations—this study seeks to uncover key challenges and effective strategies in fostering intercultural awareness, providing meaningful implications for EFL teaching.

Participants

The study involved English teachers and students from Z High School in Zhuhai, China. According to Wang and Hairon (2017), teachers with more than 10 years of experience are more effective in integrating knowledge-building strategies. To ensure a variety of perspectives, one young teacher and two experienced teachers with over ten years of experience were selected to explore how intercultural awareness is cultivated in high school English classrooms, as illustrated in table 2:

Table 2 Basic information of P 1-P3

| Participants | Age | Teaching Experience (year) | Academic Qualification | Level | English Proficiency |
|--------------|-----|----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| P1 | 28 | 2 | Master Degree | junior teacher | Advanced |
| P2 | 40 | 10 | Master Degree | intermediate teacher | Advanced |
| P3 | 55 | 25 | Bachelor Degree | senior teacher | Advanced |

The reasons for selecting these three teachers included:

1. Experienced Teachers: The two senior teachers brought a wealth of background and extensive experience, providing valuable insights into how to integrate intercultural content amidst the pressures of university entrance examinations.
2. Fresh Perspectives from a Young Teacher: A young teacher was chosen to provide fresh teaching methods and perspectives, especially in terms of employing modern educational technologies and methodologies.
3. Diverse Educational Levels: The three teachers represented different educational levels and subject specializations, helping to comprehensively understand the school's strategies and challenges in cultivating intercultural awareness.

The selection of these teachers ensured that the study could cover a range of teaching stages from junior to senior levels, thus providing a comprehensive reflection of the implementation of intercultural education.

Instrument

Semi-structured interview

Hancock & Algozzine (2017) underscored the potency of employing semi-structured interviews within the realm of case study investigations. This approach fosters a dynamic interaction between interviewer and participant, facilitating the emergence of rich and contextually relevant data. Considering that this study sought to comprehensively understand teachers' perspectives on instructional practices and the challenges associated with fostering intercultural awareness, semi-structured interviews were employed to ensure the acquisition of rich information from teachers' viewpoints. The question design of the text drew from interview content featured in Han (2017) study titled "A Research on Cultivating Students' English Cultural Awareness in High School" and Liu's (2020) study titled "Study on Experiential Strategies of Cultural Awareness Cultivation in High School English Teaching."

Non- participant observation

In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of how teachers cultivate intercultural awareness in the classroom, the researchers adopted the non-participant observation method and observed P1, P2 and P3 classrooms respectively. Non-participation observation enables researchers to record and analyze teachers' teaching behaviors, students' responses and classroom atmosphere without interfering with normal classroom teaching activities. The main observation is P1, P2 and P3 open lessons, including how teachers introduce and integrate cross-cultural content, student participation and classroom interaction.

Reflection and credibility

To ensure credibility, researchers remained neutral during data collection and analysis, strictly following established procedures. The study used data triangulation by combining semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations to enhance data accuracy and comprehensiveness. Classroom observations helped counter subjective biases from interviews by directly capturing teachers' behaviors and students' reactions. This approach provided richer data on teaching strategies and student interactions, ensuring authenticity and reliability while offering strong empirical support for integrating cultural content in future EFL teaching.

Data Analysis

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations. Interview questions were designed to assess teachers' perceptions of intercultural awareness, including their cognition(cultural knowledge acquisition), emotion(attitudes), and behavior(their strategies for implementing intercultural cultivation) according to the curriculum standards, the challenges they face and their suggestions. Classroom observations focused on how cultural content was introduced, how students engaged with cultural topics, and the extent to which classroom interactions reflected intercultural awareness.

Data Compilation

Interviews: Digital recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim and verified for accuracy to ensure reliability.

Observations: Detailed observational notes were taken during class sessions, capturing teaching methods, student interactions, and the integration of cultural content.

Coding Process and Theme Development

a. Interviews coding process is shown in the figure 2

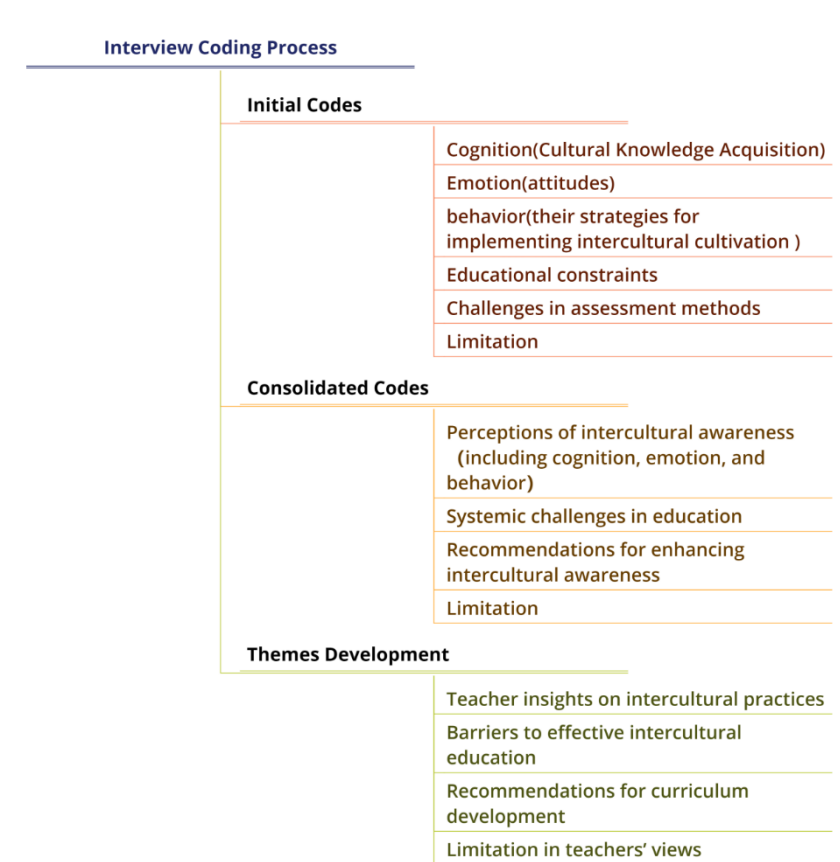


Figure 2 Interview coding process

b. Classroom Observations is shown in the figure 3

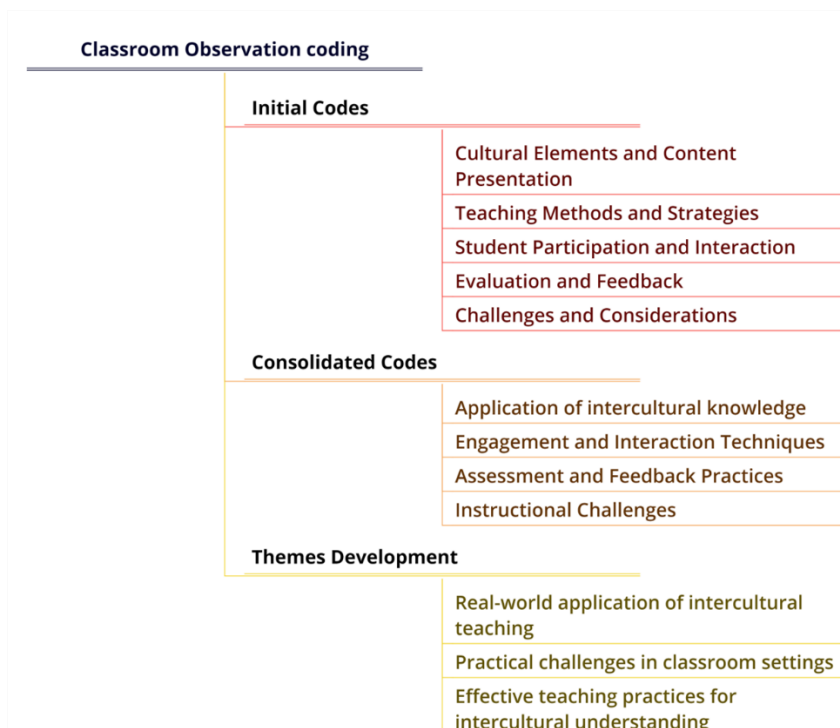


Figure 3 Classroom Observation Coding process

FINDINGS

This study centered on exploring the status quo of the cultivation of intercultural awareness, drawing inspiration from the concept within the 2017 Chinese high school English curriculum standards. Based on the qualitative research method, this study conducted semi-structured interviews and Non-participant class observation in Zhuhai Z Middle School, Guangdong Province, aiming to explore the insights of educators and learners on the current situation of intercultural awareness English teaching.

Findings Based on Research Question 1

Based on the interview with three English teachers in Z High School, as shown in figure 2(based on research question 1) :

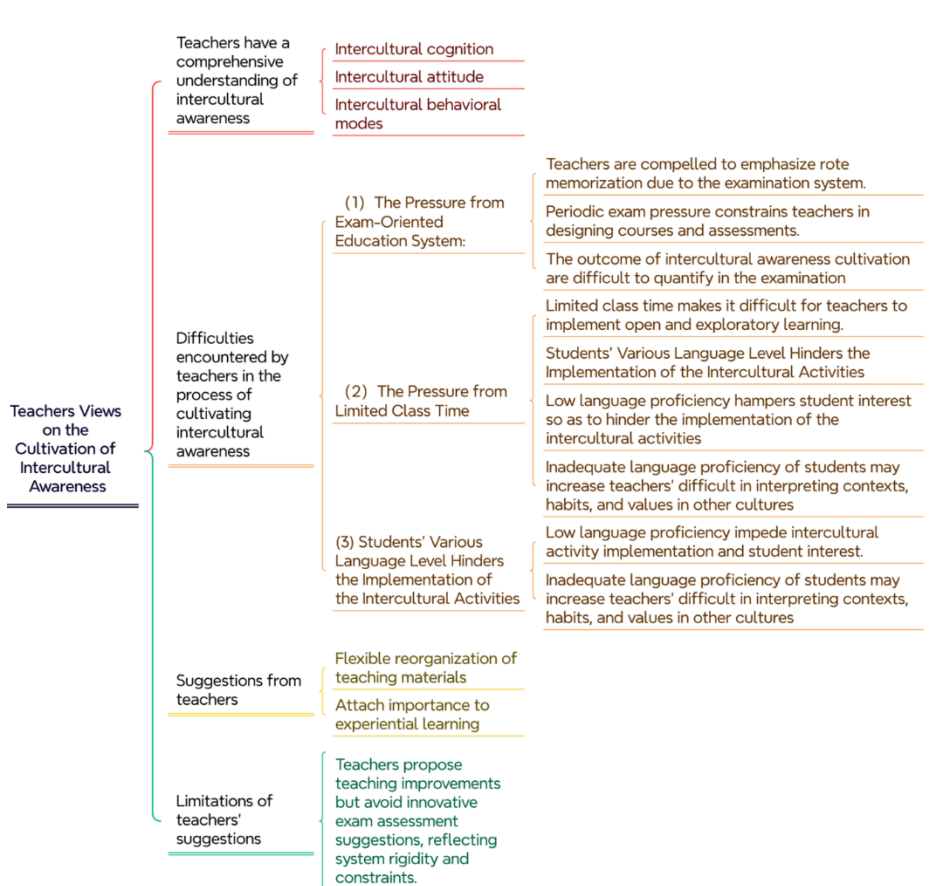


Figure 4. Teachers' Views on the Cultivation of Intercultural Awareness

Findings Analysis Based on Theme Development--Interview

Teacher insights on intercultural practices

Teachers exhibited a strong understanding of intercultural awareness, aligning with the three key dimensions outlined in the High School English Curriculum Standards (2017, 2020): cognition (cultural knowledge acquisition), emotion (cultural attitudes), and behavior (cultural application).

Cognition (Cultural Knowledge Acquisition)

Teachers acknowledged that intercultural awareness extends beyond linguistic proficiency to encompass a broad understanding of cultural differences, historical contexts, and social norms. They emphasized the necessity of exposing students to diverse cultural perspectives and fostering their ability to navigate intercultural communication effectively. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of integrating both

traditional and contemporary cultural elements, ensuring that students remain adaptable to emerging cultural trends in a globalized world.

"Cultural consciousness requires teachers to recognize cultural differences, promote Chinese culture, and foster cultural confidence by presenting our rich traditions through English or other foreign languages." (P1-00:00:04)

"In addition to traditional culture, teachers should also incorporate new cultural phenomena, acknowledging their role in shaping contemporary cultural interactions." (P1-00:02:09)

Emotion (Cultural Attitudes)

Teachers underscored the need to cultivate students' respect for cultural diversity while reinforcing confidence in their own cultural identity. They expressed concerns that some students tend to overvalue foreign cultures, often adopting an uncritical admiration for Western lifestyles. To address this, teachers advocated for a balanced approach, where students critically compare multiple cultures to appreciate their unique merits while maintaining a strong sense of national identity.

"Many children today are influenced by aspects of 'soft culture' from the West, leading to behaviors that overly idealize foreign customs. It is essential to strengthen cultural awareness education in schools. However, this does not mean Western culture should be viewed negatively; rather, we should guide students to think critically, analyze multiple cultures, and identify outstanding aspects of each." (P2-00:01:53)

Behavior (Cultural Application)

Beyond knowledge and attitudes, teachers highlighted the importance of applying intercultural awareness in real-world contexts. They emphasized that effective intercultural education should extend beyond theoretical discussions to include practical opportunities for students to engage with diverse cultural materials, role-playing exercises, and discussions on cultural dilemmas. This experiential approach allows students to develop the ability to interpret cultural nuances and communicate appropriately across cultural boundaries.

"Cultural consciousness shapes an individual's perception of self, society, and the world. It reflects a person's values, attitudes, and behavioral orientation in intercultural interactions." (P3-00:00:10)

Overall, teachers demonstrated a well-rounded understanding of intercultural awareness, advocating for a balanced approach that integrates cultural knowledge, fosters critical thinking, and encourages real-world application. However, while they recognized the importance of intercultural education, systemic challenges such as exam-oriented pressures and time constraints continue to hinder its full implementation.

Barriers to effective intercultural education

The Pressure from Exam-Oriented Education System

While national curriculum reforms advocate for intercultural awareness, the current assessment system lacks corresponding evaluation metrics, resulting in a misalignment between policy and practice.

In the current Chinese education system, the exam-oriented approach poses challenges for English teachers in cultivating intercultural awareness. Due to the focus on the college entrance exam, teachers prioritize subject knowledge over intercultural education, leaving little time to explore other cultures in depth. Both P2 and P3 highlighted this issue:

"At present, the college entrance examination still pays more attention to the training of students' English skills. Although the cultivation of cultural awareness is an important dimension, its results are difficult to quantify." (P2-00:08:25)

“...Even if teachers have made great efforts to cultivate students' cultural awareness in cultural teaching, such teaching results are difficult to quantify and can hardly be reflected in the scores of the college entrance examination,... in the process of reading and writing practice, students can still quickly achieve the purpose of improving their scores by expanding the number of words, reciting template sentence patterns and other language forms and English skills (general reading and writing) training..” (P3-00:09:32)

Due to the focus on the college entrance exam, schools place significant performance pressure on English teachers through frequent assessments like monthly, mid-term, and final exams. This limits teachers' ability to design and evaluate curricula that foster intercultural competence, as exams emphasize measurable knowledge points. As a result, English courses often become focused on test-taking skills rather than developing true intercultural communication, as noted by P1, P2, and P3:

“Since the time is really very limited, a lot of our time is taken up by doing the paper exercises, and the time for talking exercises accounts for the majority of the review content, so the complete cultural column activities are basically compressed...” (P1-00:04:43)

“...Sometimes, under the pressure of exams (especially near the monthly exams, midterms, and finals), I sometimes choose to cut out some cultural teaching content and focus on the teaching of students' language knowledge and grammar knowledge...” (P2-00:08:25)

“I will teach simple cultural topics according to the allotted time for each unit, but there is still a gap in the effect required by the new curriculum standards, because the class time is limited, and we have to take into account the mastery of students' language knowledge and meet the requirements of the exam-oriented education examination...” (P3-00:07:20)

In addition, P2 also mentioned the attitude of students. He believed that apart from the utilitarian mentality of teachers, students also had this kind of attitude. Compared with the goal of intercultural awareness cultivation, which could not be clearly quantified, they were more willing to spend time on learning test-taking skills. The following is P2's perspective on this matter:

"The current college entrance examination questions do not have a very quantitative standard for the cultivation of students' cultural awareness, so due to the pressure of exam-oriented education, many students are more interested in improving test-taking skills, quickly mastering the learning of relevant words and grammar, and achieving the purpose of rapidly improving scores, rather than pursuing the vague goal of cultivating cultural awareness." (P2- 00:11:10) If students are given a lot of time for discussion in class, it will inevitably occupy a lot of time that could be used for doing exercises or memorizing knowledge points...” (P2-00:08:25)

Participants revealed that an overwhelming emphasis on examinations restricts intercultural education. P2 and P3 noted that cultural content often gets sidelined as it does not directly contribute to test scores. This aligns with Wang (2017), who argued that exam-oriented systems prioritize language proficiency over intercultural competence. The interviews suggest that while curriculum guidelines emphasize intercultural skills (Ministry of Education, 2020), the assessment structure creates a conflict, limiting their practical implementation.

The Pressure from Limited Class Time

In the context of exam-oriented education, English teachers were faced with enormous pressure of fixed class time in the process of cultivating intercultural awareness. The established compact class hours in schools made it difficult for teachers to provide enough time for the cultivation of intercultural awareness in the compact teaching plan. English teaching usually needed to focus on solving problems in grammar, listening,

speaking, reading and writing, etc., while the cultivation of intercultural awareness required more time for open and exploratory learning, which was in contradiction with the limited class hours. Below are teachers' opinions:

"the new curriculum standard requires teachers to conduct a special cultural column activity after each unit of teaching, but it is basically difficult for me to implement it". (P1- 00:04:43) .

P2 also mentioned this problem,

"The biggest challenge is limited class time and varying student levels. I can't dedicate much time to cultivating cultural awareness because I also need to cover vocabulary, grammar, and skills like listening, writing, and reading. Even when teaching through unit themes, the content is extensive, and explaining it takes time. Additionally, some materials are far from real life, requiring extra time to localize and adapt, which makes the class time feel even tighter" (P2- 00:08:25) .

P3 believed that there was a time conflict between "language knowledge teaching" and "cultural activities development", and the time of one class was limited, so it was very challenging to complete the two tasks at the same time, saying:

"Teachers spend a lot of time on the practice of fragmented words, grammar or other language forms, which will occupy a lot of time in cultural teaching activities. In this way, the "teaching of language knowledge" and the "development of cultural activities" have been fighting between the two, and it is difficult for teachers to do everything in one class." (P3- 00:09:32)

Students' Various Language Level Hinders the Implementation of the Intercultural Activities

Students' limited language proficiency impacts both their enthusiasm for intercultural activities and presents challenges for English teachers in China. Low confidence in their English skills makes students fear communication failures, reducing their willingness to engage in intercultural activities, which in turn reinforces a cycle of self-limitation. P1 clearly mentioned this point in the interview:

"The second difficulty is that the students' English level is limited, mainly because the number of words is not enough. Sometimes students know how to express what they want to say in Chinese, but it is difficult to paraphrase it in English." (P1- 00:05:49)

In this regard, P3 and the former have similar expressions:

"There are also difficulties such as insufficient vocabulary. When discussing or demonstrating activities, only a few students with a good foundation are enthusiastic, and most students keep silent, not because they don't like the activity, but because they don't know how to express it." (P3- 00:09:32)

In addition, inadequate language proficiency may cause students to have difficulty understanding and interpreting contexts, habits, and values in other cultures. In intercultural education, language was not only a communication tool, but also the key to understanding cultural deposits. If students' language level did not support in-depth contextual understanding, they may miss the nuances of cultural differences and thus fail to truly appreciate the meaning of other cultures. This point was clearly mentioned in P2,

"Because many students have little knowledge of many cultural phenomena, even local culture, you say that they do not understand it, they can say a little, but to tell it completely, they cannot do it." (P2- 00:14:40)

Teachers face the challenge of varying student language levels when cultivating intercultural awareness. They must design activities that are accessible to all students, requiring flexible teaching strategies to ensure everyone improves and participates effectively. P1 notes that this disparity in student levels adds pressure on teachers to enhance both their cultural and language literacy:

“... Therefore, one of the challenges teachers face is that students may express themselves in Chinese first in class, and teachers need to guide them to learn to express themselves in English, which is also a challenge to teachers' cultural literacy and knowledge literacy. Of course, this link also takes a long time. In general, I think there is a gap between the cultivation of cultural awareness presented in the actual classroom and the requirements of each class under the new curriculum standards.” (P1- 00:05:49)”

The findings highlight how language proficiency influences students' willingness to engage in intercultural discussions. P1 observed that students with lower proficiency levels are hesitant to participate, mirroring Amoah and Yeboah's (2021) assertion that linguistic confidence is crucial in fostering intercultural competence. This suggests that a more inclusive pedagogical approach, such as scaffolding techniques (Gao, 2006), may be required to bridge the proficiency gap.

Recommendations for curriculum development

In their suggestions on cultivating intercultural awareness in School Z, the teachers emphasized a series of key measures aimed at comprehensively promoting students' intercultural understanding and communication ability, which include two dimensions:

Flexible reorganization of teaching materials

First, teachers suggested that more specific intercultural content should be embedded in the lesson plans, and teaching elements such as cases, literary works or field trips related to different cultures should be introduced to stimulate students' interest and curiosity in multiculturalism, so as to improve their intercultural cognition level. P2 points out that:

"Teachers should consciously lead students to explore related cultural topics and tell students the importance of establishing cultural awareness with their own appeal." In addition, according to the actual interests and needs of students, teachers should provide supplementary materials such as pictures, videos, audio or visit materials, so as to prepare students' interest in intercultural knowledge accumulation in the early stage." (00:21:59)

Secondly, teachers could make full use of their own understanding of the material and precisely cut out some content to make the curriculum more compact and targeted. This not only improved learning efficiency, but also left valuable time for intercultural activities. With a planned reduction of redundant content, teachers were able to schedule cultural topics more flexibly, ensuring that students truly experience and understand other cultures in depth within a limited period of time. This point is clearly mentioned in both P1 and P3:

“Teachers can adjust the course progress by themselves, cut some unnecessary content on the basis of their understanding of the textbooks, and make efficient use of the time of each class, so that part of the time can be allocated for students to carry out cultural activities.” (P1-00:17:13)

"Given our limited class time, teachers must make flexible choices, adjusting content based on students' needs. For example, if a unit's language knowledge is too difficult, cultural content can be reduced, but if the next unit is easier, the cultural knowledge can be expanded" (P3-00:04:57)

Teachers suggested integrating cultural themes into classroom tasks, such as group projects and cultural research reports, to deepen students' understanding of other cultures and enhance their intercultural communication skills. This approach combines cultural learning with subject knowledge, allowing students to develop teamwork and comprehensive abilities. P3 discussed this extensively in his interview:

"I think teachers need to make changes. Despite the pressure of exams and class time, they should incorporate cultural awareness training into each lesson, whether through brief discussions or end-of-unit activities. This shows students that cultural training is a priority, even under exam pressure. Schools should also organize activities to encourage both teachers and students to engage in intercultural teaching, fostering greater enthusiasm for cultivating cultural awareness" (P3-00:23:26)"

In summary, teachers at Z-School proposed a practical framework to integrate intercultural awareness by adjusting teaching materials. They recommended adding more intercultural content to spark interest while removing unnecessary material to allow more time for learning. Task-based activities were designed to engage students in practical experiences, enhancing their intercultural communication and teamwork skills, while emphasizing both theoretical knowledge and practical application.

Attach Importance to Experiential Learning

On the topic of "the relationship between experiential learning and cultivating students' intercultural awareness", researches such as P1, P2 and P3 all gave positive evaluation to experiential learning. This reflected the academic consensus on the importance of experiential learning in cultivating intercultural awareness. However, in terms of the application of experiential learning, P1, P2 and P3 had their own different views:

"I think experiential learning can help students develop intercultural awareness step by step and imperceptibly in the experience. If teachers directly inculcate opinions to students, it is difficult for students to experience cultural differences and cultural awareness from the emotional level, so teachers need to let students experience through specific activities, such as discussion, role play, imitation performance and so on." (P1-00:08:22)

"Experiential learning is a necessary stage to cultivate students' intercultural awareness, because many students for many cultural phenomena, even the local culture is actually a state of half-understanding..." (P2-00:14:40)

"Experiential learning can make students' perception more profound. I will use videos or other forms of materials as lead in class to help students enter the scene atmosphere in advance, so that students are willing to put down some of the grudges or other bad emotions in their hearts, and their intercultural tolerance is improved." (P3-00:12:23)

The discussion underscores the key role of experiential learning in fostering intercultural awareness. P1 highlighted its importance in enhancing emotional connections with other cultures, P2 saw it as crucial for deepening cultural understanding, and P3 emphasized its role in promoting intercultural tolerance and acceptance. Overall, experiential learning helps develop emotional awareness, cultural understanding, and tolerance.

Limitations of teachers' suggestions

The teachers offered many valuable suggestions regarding the exam-oriented system, such as limited class time and students' eagerness to participate in activities, but they did not provide suggestions for improving the current teaching evaluation method, which heavily relies on traditional examinations. This reflects the constraints teachers face due to test pressure and the rigidity of the existing assessment system, which limits

their ability to incorporate diverse evaluation techniques. As a result, teachers may have been hesitant to propose creative alternatives for assessments, even though they suggested ways to enhance classroom management and student engagement. Future research could explore more adaptable and diverse teacher assessment methods within the exam-oriented system, such as project evaluations, practical assignments, and group collaboration assessments. This would support students' overall development while also aligning with the existing educational framework, ultimately creating an evaluation model that better reflects comprehensive literacy training.

Findings Based on Research Question 2

The reason why this study added non-participant classroom observations is that interview data may be influenced by teacher subjective bias and social expectation effects. Through non-participatory classroom observation, researchers can directly observe the actual teaching behavior of teachers and students' real reactions, and obtain more objective data. Furthermore, classroom observations were supplemented with details not covered in the interviews. The researchers recorded how teachers incorporate cultural content, how students interact, and the challenges and solutions arising in the teaching process to obtain more comprehensive information.

Table 3. Non-participant Classroom Observations

| Aspect | P1: Music unit | P2: Blog writing unit | P3: Multicultural unit |
|---|---|--|--|
| Cultural elements and content presentation | Used music from different countries - Explained music's role in culture | Analyzed shopping habits and safety - Introduced online shopping's cultural background | Detailed Chinatown's history, population, and culture - Helped understand cultural phenomena |
| Teaching methods and strategies | - Explained repair techniques - Encouraged sharing personal experiences | - Combined listening, reading, and discussions - Explained different shopping habits and safety | - Integrated reading and writing - Applied cultural knowledge through activities |
| Student participation and interaction | - Group discussions on music's cultural background - Shared understanding and appreciation of music - Used music videos and audio for real-world cultural context | - Role-playing different cultural shopping scenarios - Shared experiences and safety tips - Analyzed cultural behavior differences - Teacher Q&A sessions | - Group discussions and writing exercises on Chinatown - Integrated personal experiences into writing - Used images and videos for direct cultural understanding - Encouraged critical thinking on cultural differences |
| Evaluation and feedback | - Teacher provided immediate feedback and group evaluations - Students improved presentation content and methods - Teacher provided detailed criteria and suggestions | - Peer reviews and blog interactions - Teacher guided and provided feedback - Draft reviews and feedback - Improved writing and cultural understanding | - Teacher provided staged writing guidance and feedback - Teacher reviewed and suggested improvements - Organized self-evaluations |
| Challenges and considerations | - Some students might struggle with understanding cultural nuances in music. | - Students might be unfamiliar with shopping habits of some countries. | - Students might lack cultural knowledge for writing tasks. |

| Aspect | P1: Music unit | P2: Blog writing unit | P3: Multicultural unit |
|--------|--|---|--|
| | - Balancing time for teaching grammar and cultural content can be challenging. | - Discussions might lead to information overload. | - Guiding and evaluating a large number of students' work can cause time pressure. |

Findings Analysis Based on Theme Development--Class Observation

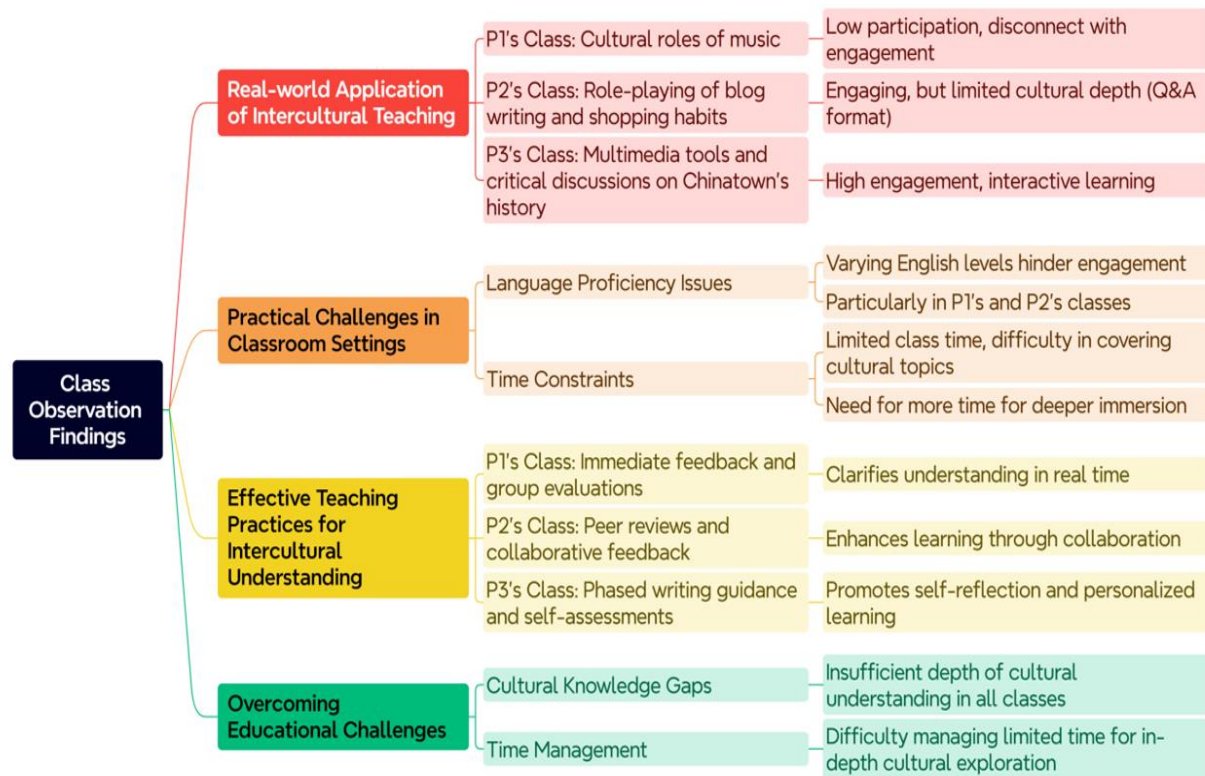


Figure 6 Class Observation Findings

Real-world Application of Intercultural Teaching

Classroom observations indicate that all three teachers (P1, P2, and P3) effectively incorporate cultural knowledge through various strategies tailored to enhance students' understanding of cross-cultural dynamics.

- **P1's Class:** Focused on the cultural roles of music, utilizing music from different countries to foster cultural awareness. Despite this creative approach, the class experienced low participation, indicating a potential disconnect between the teaching method and student engagement.
- **P2's Class:** Utilized role-playing to explore cultural aspects of blog writing and shopping habits, fostering a dynamic learning environment. The sessions primarily involved Q&A, which, while engaging, might limit deeper exploration of cultural nuances.
- **P3's Class:** Demonstrated the most effective engagement, using multimedia tools and critical discussions centered around Chinatown's history and culture, which allowed students to deeply connect with the material through practical and interactive learning experiences.

Practical Challenges in Classroom Settings

Despite the innovative approaches to teaching cultural content, varying levels of language proficiency among students posed significant challenges in all three classes, affecting their ability to fully engage with the intercultural activities.

- **Language Proficiency Issues:** Varied levels of English among students influenced their participation, particularly in P1's and P2's classes, where deeper engagement with cultural content was often hindered by linguistic barriers.
- **Time Constraints:** All teachers struggled with limited class time, which often made it challenging to cover complex cultural topics comprehensively. This was particularly evident in the need for more time to facilitate discussions and activities that require deeper cultural immersion.

Effective Teaching Practices for Intercultural Understanding

The strategies employed for assessment and feedback varied across classes, reflecting different approaches to enhancing student learning and intercultural competence.

- **P1's Class:** Employed immediate feedback and group evaluations, which were crucial for real-time adjustments and helped clarify students' understanding of the cultural content.
- **P2's Class:** Introduced peer reviews, enhancing learning through collaborative feedback, which encouraged students to learn from each other and fostered a deeper understanding of different cultural perspectives.
- **P3's Class:** Offered phased writing guidance and self-assessments, promoting self-reflection and allowing students to progress at their own pace, which supported more personalized learning experiences.

Overcoming Educational Challenges

Common challenges such as inadequate cultural knowledge and time constraints were observed across all classes, highlighting systemic issues that affect the effectiveness of intercultural teaching.

- **Cultural Knowledge Gaps:** All classes showed signs of insufficient depth in cultural understanding, which could prevent students from fully appreciating complex cultural interactions.
- **Time Management:** Managing the limited time available to explore extensive cultural topics remains a significant challenge, requiring strategic planning and possibly curriculum adjustments to allow for deeper engagement.

Risk Analysis

It must be noted that most of the open classes are of a certain exemplary nature. The purpose of open classes is to demonstrate the teacher's teaching methods and classroom management skills, which are often carefully prepared, including pre-designed beautiful courseware, perfect timing and interaction with students. Therefore, the performance in the open class may not be fully representative of the real situation of everyday teaching. In the process of listening to and grinding lessons, if these open classes are used as the only reference, it may lead to misunderstanding of the actual teaching situation. Therefore, the universality of the results should be treated with caution when using open class data. In order to obtain more comprehensive and real teaching data, it is suggested to combine routine classroom observations and teacher interviews in non-open courses to compensate for the limitations of open course research. Through the comprehensive analysis of various data sources, the methods and strategies of teachers in practical teaching can be more accurately understood, so as to provide more feasible suggestions for improvement.

CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of non-participant observations and teacher interviews, this study revealed key insights and challenges in promoting intercultural awareness in EFL classrooms.

Discussion on the results

Existing studies emphasize the necessity of balancing linguistic and cultural education (Byram, 2020; McKay, 2003). However, this study reveals that in Chinese EFL settings, cultural integration remains constrained by assessment policies. Similar challenges were identified by Othman and Ruslan (2020) in their study on teacher professional development, indicating that systemic factors play a crucial role in shaping instructional priorities.

A key takeaway from the findings is the gap between theoretical curriculum reforms and classroom realities. While the 2017 curriculum highlights intercultural awareness as a core competency (Ministry of Education, 2020), this study shows that practical barriers, such as time constraints and student proficiency, hinder effective implementation. This reflects Halliday's (2007) perspective that language learning should be socially embedded, yet the institutional framework does not fully support such an approach.

RECOMMENDATION

To further enhance the cultivation of intercultural awareness, continuous teacher training programs should be implemented to help teachers master the necessary skills to effectively integrate cultural elements into language teaching. Curriculum design also needs to systematically incorporate cross-cultural elements, designing activities that focus on both language ability and provide rich cultural experience, so that students can deepen their understanding of different cultures and improve their cross-cultural communication skills.

Furthermore, flexible assessment methods need to be developed to encourage the integration of cross-cultural learning. Adequate resource allocation is equally critical. Providing teachers with culturally related materials and sufficient time for experiential learning activities can support the effective implementation of cross-cultural education. It is also important to support students with different levels of language competence, and through differentiated teaching and additional support mechanisms, students' participation and participation in cross-cultural activities can be enhanced to meet the diverse needs of students.

Limitations

Despite the valuable insights gained, this study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, limiting the generalizability of the findings. A larger sample could provide more robust and widely applicable results. Secondly, the study relied on non-participant observations and interviews, which, despite their strengths, might not capture all aspects of classroom dynamics and teacher-student interactions. Additional methods, such as student surveys or longitudinal studies, could offer a more comprehensive understanding.

Furthermore, the study was conducted within a specific educational context, which may not reflect the diversity of other settings. Cultural and institutional differences could influence the effectiveness of the strategies used. Finally, the inherent subjectivity in interpreting qualitative data could introduce bias. Future research should consider incorporating mixed methods to triangulate data and enhance the validity of the findings.

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