

# EFL Learners' Attitude Towards Culture and Cultural Learning

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**Abstract:** Language and culture are complementary, helpful, and inspiring to one another. Especially for foreign language learners, culture is extremely important to understand the social and cultural background of the target language. This study aims to explore foreign language learners' perception towards cultural learning. In order to come to a conclusion, a quantitative method was adopted by distributing questionnaires to 31 Chinese EFL students. From the perspective of Chinese students, culture and cultural learning are crucial in the second language acquisition process.

**Keywords:** EFL learner; Culture; Cultural learning; Attitude

*Online publication:* May 30, 2022

## 1. Introduction

Foreign language learning includes two aspects: language learning and cultural learning. Language learning refers to learning the pronunciation and grammar of a certain language. Cultural learning, on the other hand, involves learning the customs, literature, art, ideology, and spirit of a country. Through language learning, learners can master a vast amount of language information and communicate with the language group simply with another language, but they are unable to communicate at the deep level in terms of the cultural aspect<sup>[1]</sup>. When language learners come to understand the second language culture, they will be able to gauge the differences and social distance between the two cultures. This will undoubtedly speed up the mastery of foreign languages and enhance the degree of integration with the people who have learned the language.

In China, foreign language education must emphasize on cultural learning, whether it is in the stage of basic English education, or in college teaching, or whether the English major is involved, or in non-English major ESP teaching. Cultural learning has been widely recognized by the majority of English education circles and is highly concerned by foreign language circles. The enhancement of cultural learning will affect the psychological and cognitive changes of learners in the process of language learning<sup>[2]</sup>.

In recent years, many scholars and researchers have been exploring the attitudes of learners toward cultural learning and the impact of cultural learning on language learning<sup>[3]</sup>. For instance, McKay found that the integration of cultural components into language teaching can increase motivation in a language class<sup>[4]</sup>. Nault invited scholars, language educators, and practitioners to reconsider the existing state of cultures and their representations for the development of EIL; he also pointed out that English educators should pay attention to other target cultures besides British and American cultures<sup>[5]</sup>.

### **1.1. Cultural knowledge**

Cultural knowledge consists of information about the characteristics of one's own and other people's cultures. It can be external, which means that it is given by someone else; static, which means that it is not modified from experience; articulated, which means that it is reduced to what words can express; stereotypical, which refers to general norms rather than specific instances; reduced, which means that it has been selected from all the information available, and it typically omits information about variation and exceptions. The information is normally given in the form of facts, statistics, generalizations, and examples. Cultural knowledge can be useful in helping us to understand ourselves and other people. However, it can also be misleading because it is dependent on other people's expertise, objectivity, and integrity; in addition, it is fixed in time (often out of date), inevitably simplified, and often conceals as much as it reveals <sup>[6]</sup>.

### **1.2. Cultural awareness**

Cultural awareness involves a gradually developing inner sense of equality of cultures, a better understanding of one's own and other people's cultures, as well as an interest in how cultures both connect and differ <sup>[7]</sup>. Such awareness can broaden the mind, increase tolerance, and facilitate international communication <sup>[8]</sup>. It can facilitate language acquisition, as being positive, empathetic, and inquisitive. It also contributes to one of the optimal conditions for language acquisition: motivated exposure to language in use <sup>[9]</sup>.

### **1.3. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)**

ICC is formulated by Intercultural Competence (IC) and Communicative Competence (CC), which are made up of five components: (1) intercultural attitude, which can be defined as curiosity, openness, or readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and the belief about one's own culture; (2) intercultural knowledge, which involves learning about social groups, products, practices, and processes of interaction; (3) skills of interpreting and relating, which are understood as the capabilities to identify and explain cultural perspectives and mediate between or function in new cultural contexts; (4) skills of discovering and interacting, which are the abilities to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices as well as to operate knowledge attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication; (5) critical cultural awareness, which refers to the ability to evaluate the perspectives and practices of one's own and other people's cultures critically <sup>[10]</sup>.

Through this study, language learners and teachers will come to understand the importance of cultural learning, so as to finetune their focus on cultural learning. It will also provide some reference for the curriculum design based on integrating cultural learning into language learning.

## **2. Research purpose**

This study aims to investigate Chinese students' perception on cultural learning when learning English language as a foreign language. In order to achieve the aim, several questions have been proposed.

What is the perception of Chinese students on cultural learning, along:

- (1) the importance of culture and cultural learning;
- (2) the importance of culture and intercultural competence;
- (3) how to learn culture?

## **3. Methodology**

In order to determine Chinese learners' perception towards cultural learning, the quantitative methodology was used. The questionnaire was adopted from Ayhan Kahraman's research "Teachers and Learners Attitudes towards Culture and Culture Learning in a Turkish Context" <sup>[11]</sup>.

Thirty-one questionnaires were distributed to second language learners of Chinese descent via an online platform.

#### 4. Results and discussion

This section presents, discusses, and interprets the results based on the data collected.

##### 4.1. Perception on the importance of culture and cultural learning

In the ESL/EFL learning, it is necessary to provide the cultural context and awareness to learners so as to improve the proficiency in intercultural communication using the target language <sup>[11]</sup>. **Table 1** shows the Chinese students' perception of the importance of culture and cultural learning.

**Table 1.** Importance of culture and cultural learning

Indicator	Mean	Description
It is important for students to learn cultures of English-speaking countries, such as American and British cultures.	3.35	Very Important
It is important to obtain information about the target culture.	3.42	Very Important
It is important to obtain information about the shared values and beliefs of L2 culture.	3.03	Important
It is also important to promote students' understanding about their own culture.	3.61	Very Important
It is important to develop positive attitude and tolerance toward L2 culture.	3.52	Very Important
It is important for students to spend more time on learning L2 culture.	3.23	Important
	3.36	Very Important

From the data presented, it can be seen that most of the respondents have the idea that culture and cultural learning are important in second language learning.

Almost all of the students (3.61) think that cultural learning can help them understand their own culture, indicating that these learners believe that their native culture is equally as important as the target culture. Awareness of one's own culture is important because it can keep people from projecting their values onto others. Projection, in this sense, refers to the tendency of thinking that other people are doing something for the same reasons they would. This may happen when people are unaware of the values that drive them and are unable to distinguish them from those held by other cultures <sup>[10]</sup>. On the contrary, learning the culture of another language can help learners better understand their own culture. The culture of another language provides learners with a new perspective when looking at their own culture. The differences between cultures can also deepen learners' understanding of their own cultures.

Furthermore, it is believed that cultural learning can promote the development of positive attitude and tolerance toward second language culture (3.52). Cultural awareness reduces students' fear and prepares them to deal with different people in different situations; it also increases tolerance. With the expansion of knowledge about other cultures, learners will gain more understanding and resonance of their language and behavior. This will improve learners' tolerance towards culture and enable them to view a certain language and behavior from the perspective of another country's culture. Needless to say, cultural learning can improve learners' attitude towards L2 culture <sup>[15]</sup>.

Some respondents (3.03) think it is important to obtain information about shared values and beliefs of L2 culture. Culture contains not only values and beliefs, but also ideas, customs, skills, art, and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time <sup>[15]</sup>. Therefore, in language learning, teachers should not only attach importance to the values and beliefs of L2 culture, but also other aspects, such as customs.

In a word, cultural learning is crucial in second language learning. It gives clarity to students' learning of their own culture and develops their tolerance towards L2 culture.

#### 4.2. Perception on the importance of culture and intercultural competence

As mentioned by Byram, foreign language teachers guide learners through the process of acquiring competencies in terms of attitude, knowledge, and skills related to intercultural competence while using a foreign language <sup>[10]</sup>. Particularly, language learners should be involved in activities to enhance their intercultural competence, such as exploring their national identities in relation to history, geography, and other institutions, building relationships between cultures, as well as determining the similarities and differences between them <sup>[17]</sup>. **Table 2** shows the Chinese students' perception on the importance of culture and intercultural competence.

**Table 2.** Importance of culture and intercultural competence

Indicator	Mean	Description
In a foreign language classroom, cultural teaching is as important as language teaching.	3.16	Important
Before teaching L2 culture, students must possess a sufficient level of L2 proficiency.	2.77	Important
It is impossible to learn L2 culture and L2 language in an integrated way.	2.10	Less Important
The cultural contents of the textbooks used in the department meet the students' expectations.	2.81	Important
Intercultural competence can be acquired at school.	2.84	Important
L2 cultural teaching can improve intercultural competence.	3.29	Very Important
	2.83	Important

Most respondents (2.83) felt that intercultural competence is important for them to learn a second language.

Most respondents (3.29) also believe that second language cultural teaching can improve their intercultural competence. At the heart of intercultural competence is the preparation of individuals to interact appropriately and effectively with those from other cultural backgrounds <sup>[18]</sup>. Hence, understanding culture is an integral component of intercultural competence. In other words, the mastery and understanding of certain cultural knowledge is the basis of improving a person's intercultural competence. Therefore, it is very important for foreign language learners to learn some knowledge about foreign cultures, so as to improve their intercultural communicative competence.

From **Table 2**, it can be seen that the respondents regard cultural learning to be as essential as language learning (3.16). As mentioned, language and culture have a deep, symbolic relationship. Language stands for the whole culture because language represents culture in the minds of its speakers. Conversely, culture also symbolizes language, and it sums up the economic, religion, and philosophical systems of a country. In order to improve students' intercultural communicative competence, teachers and students should place equal importance to these two aspects in English classrooms, so as to improve students' language ability and cultural understanding at the same time.

L2 culture and L2 language can be learned in an integrated way. The 5-step strategy of cultivating intercultural communicative competence proposed by Newton indicates that one of the ways is to situate language in real communicative events, genres, or tasks that are closely link to the context of the language content <sup>[19]</sup>. All activities that integrate language learning and cultural learning prove that it is possible to integrate cultural learning into language learning.

In short, cultural learning can help develop learners' intercultural competence by widening their knowledge and deepening their understanding.

### 4.3. Perception on how to learn culture

The development of intercultural competence largely depends on the effective application of communicative strategies in foreign language learning programs. There is no scarcity of cultural learning techniques and approaches. One of the key issues is that the teachers need to be aware of such pedagogical processes aimed at improving foreign language learners' communication skills in non-native cultural settings <sup>[12]</sup>. **Table 3** shows the Chinese students' perception on how to learn culture.

**Table 3.** How to learn culture

Indicator	Mean	Description
Teachers share with students what they hear and read about L2 culture.	3.13	Important
Teachers teach culture in English class based on the textbook they are using.	3.00	Important
Teachers bring additional culture-loaded materials to discuss or use in class.	3.29	Very Important
Teachers ask students to identify the cultural aspect of the target language.	3.35	Very Important
Teachers teach students English songs or poems to expose them to different cultures.	3.29	Very Important
Teachers ask students to describe the cultural phenomena that can be found textbooks or somewhere else.	3.35	Very Important
	3.24	Important

It has been agreed on that cultural acquisition and learning are important for them (3.24).

Based on the data, the students think that teachers' guidance is crucial for cultural learning in language classes, whether it is identifying the cultural aspect of the target language (3.35) or describing the cultural phenomena that can be found in textbooks. Language teachers must always be mediators between cultures and the primary sources of the target culture for their students <sup>[20]</sup>. According to Bardos, there is a current fashionable wider interpretation of culture; that is, culture is everything that is created, made, or touched by humans, and it may become relevant from the point of view of planning language teaching. This wide interpretation has several advantages, including the freedom given to teachers to choose from various topics, thereby easily meeting these requirements <sup>[21]</sup>. It is important for teachers to guide and teach students in cultural learning during English classes because they are the designers of the class, and they know what type of activities can help achieve the teaching goals <sup>[1]</sup>.

Hatoss has emphasized the importance of cultural teaching through language learning, stating that without textbooks, English teachers would find it difficult to teach cultural contents because textbooks meet this need without having to transport students to the native speakers' country <sup>[22]</sup>. Textbooks are the basis and resource of classroom activities. The design of textbooks often corresponds to the scientific teaching objectives and methods to large extent. Therefore, teachers need to design cultural learning activities according to textbooks. However, with the development of society and the changes in culture, textbooks should not be the only basis for cultural learning. As an important resource provider, teachers should introduce more ways and resources to students, enrich the cultural content in classrooms, keep up with the development of the times and culture, as well as provide students with the fresh knowledge.

### 5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that Chinese students attach importance to cultural learning in their language learning process. They believe that cultural learning, having the same importance

as language learning, can deepen one's understanding of a culture. Meanwhile, learners' intercultural competence can be improved through cultural learning during language classes, in which teachers play a crucial and guiding role in cultural learning.

### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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