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# **Developing the Cultural Awareness of Junior High School Students in China through English Language Learning: Aims, Attitudes and Approaches.**

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# **Developing the Cultural Awareness of Junior High School Students in China through English Language Learning: Aims, Attitudes and Approaches.**

## **1. Introduction**

Few language teachers would argue that there are powerful links between language and culture and that it is difficult to teach a language without also teaching culture. There is also wide consensus that promoting learners' cultural and intercultural understanding and combating ethnocentrism is a laudable aim, and that the foreign language classroom is a natural place for this to happen.

However, to achieve this aim there are some key questions to address: How can the teaching of language and culture be effectively integrated? How do we decide which cultures, and which aspects of those cultures, should be included in our teaching?

This report focusses on joint research carried out by Nottingham Trent University in the UK and Chongqing University in China to address these questions. The research is part of a project, supported by the British Council, aiming to address the requirements of the new and revised English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education in China (2022) which lists 'cultural awareness' as one of the four 'core competencies' for students in grades 3-9.

The key objective of this joint research was to inform the development of new culture themed supplementary learning materials for junior high schools which can provide younger learners with a window onto other world cultures, developing their curiosity towards those cultures and their own, and allowing them to make comparisons and build bridges between their culture and others. It is hoped that these materials and the improvements in the existing pedagogy which they facilitate will lead not only to improved cultural awareness among learners and their teachers but also to greater communicative competence in English, since they will be given more opportunities for authentic communication about culture. The initial target for the project was the less advantaged areas of Chongqing Municipality and Yunnan, but it is hoped that the model will be more widely applicable across China.

This paper begins with a brief review of some key literature on the place of culture in foreign language teaching (including EFL), with a particular focus on the context of China and the new English curriculum standards for compulsory Education in China. It then reports on the research into the attitudes of junior high school students and English teachers in Chongqing Municipality towards integrating culture and language in their English classes. The paper ends with some recommendations on the development of learning materials which can achieve this integration and enable learners to improve both their English language proficiency and their cultural awareness.

## **2. Literature Review**

It has long been acknowledged by scholars that language and culture are connected and that there is a cultural dimension to any language. However, the strength and nature of this connection remains a topic of debate, which is due in part to contested conceptualisations of language and culture. On one side there are those like the anthropologist Michael Agar who see language and culture as inseparable. This view is characterised by Agar's coinage of the word 'languaculture' to emphasise how culture is embedded in language and how one cannot know a language without an understanding of the culture expressed by that language (Agar, 1994). On the other side of the debate are scholars like Karen Risager who break with the tradition of viewing language as part of a closed national universe of culture and people and recognise a complex and dynamic world characterised by transnational flows of people, commodities and ideas (Risager, 2007).

This ongoing discussion about the nature of the relationship between language and culture has also informed the pedagogy of foreign language teaching and particularly EFL teaching. Although it has been broadly recognised that language and culture are intertwined and should be taught in an integrated way, how that should be done, what cultures and aspects of cultures should be taught and for what overall aim have been much more contentious. For many years the mainstream view was that the target language should be taught alongside the target language culture (Valdes, 1986; Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993). In the case of English, the target language culture was typically seen as British or American and it was representations of these cultures which most commonly appeared in EFL classrooms and textbooks. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century however, this correlation

between English and a particular culture has become very problematic since, more than ever, English is internationally owned and functions as a global lingua franca in a huge range of cultural contexts (Baker 2012).

One of the most influential scholars to explore the relationship between the teaching of foreign languages and culture is Michael Byram. In his book 'Cultural studies in foreign language education' (Byram, 1989) he argued that the study of culture should be an integral part of foreign language education.

The Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model put forward in 1997 by Byram was in part a protest against the focus at that time on the practical and instrumental purposes of language learning and on the pedagogically dominant native speaker model (Byram, 2014) which echoed the views of other scholars such as Kramsch (1993, 1997). Byram argues that foreign language teaching should go beyond providing learners with factual knowledge of target cultures and instead help them become 'intercultural speakers', who can be successful in communicating information but also in "developing a human relationship with people of other languages and cultures" (Byram, 2002, p7). For Byram, a key role of the foreign language teacher is to help learners develop curiosity about other cultures, examine their attitudes to those cultures and to encourage them to reflect on the beliefs, values and behaviours in their own society. ICC, according to Byram (1997), consists of four dimensions: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and intercultural competence. The intercultural competence dimension comprises five elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, as well as critical cultural awareness. It is the latter element which is perhaps the most distinctive feature of Byram's model since it stresses the importance of a foreign language learner being able to evaluate critically the cultural perspectives, practices and products in their own and other cultures and countries rather than simply accumulating knowledge about them.

Byram is very clear that foreign language teachers do not need to know everything about the cultures of countries where the language being taught is spoken. This is anyway impossible since multiple cultures are associated with a particular language and all cultures are constantly changing (Byram, 2002). Instead, teachers should be able to help learners see the relationships between their culture and other cultures by including the critical evaluation of

intercultural encounters when designing lessons and materials and to set it as a learning outcome for their classes (Byram, 2012).

Byram's work was in the context of foreign language teaching in Europe and has greatly impacted several EU initiatives including the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). However, it has also significantly influenced thinking on the place of culture in EFL and EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) teaching worldwide. Another influential scholar in this field is Karen Risager who also breaks with the tradition of viewing language as part of a closed national universe of culture and people and recognises a complex and dynamic world characterised by transnational flows of people, commodities and ideas as part of internationalisation and globalisation (Risager, 2007). Like Byram she believes that language teaching must offer a knowledge of the world that students can use to develop their personal and cultural identity and to "cut across national boundaries and catch sight of transnational connections" (Risager, 2007, p15).

Baker (2012) applies this non-essentialist and dynamic view of culture to contexts where English is taught primarily as a lingua franca, a contact language between interlocutors with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, rather than as an L1 or an official L2. In such settings, although knowledge of specific cultures may still have an important role to play in developing an awareness of cultural differences, the learner of English could not be expected to know all the different cultural contexts in which the language is used. Instead, learners should acquire 'intercultural awareness' by being exposed to different cultural practices and products and developing the attitude and skills to evaluate them critically, compare them and relate them to their own cultural experience (Baker, 2012).

Yashima (2002) was also interested in contexts where English functions as a lingua franca for communication between individuals from all language groups and where there is no specific community with which language learners can aspire to meet and communicate. However, his focus was on what motivates learners in these contexts, and he introduced the concept of 'International Posture' which refers to a psychological stance that learners of a foreign language adopt towards the cultures associated with the language being learned. International Posture was conceptualised as an alternative to Gardner's (1985) original construct of 'integrativeness', which is the motivational desire to meet, communicate with and get to know members of a specific language community. Instead, International Posture is

associated with a global identity which involves an interest in international affairs, readiness to interact with intercultural partners and a non-ethnocentric attitude towards cultural diversity. (Yashima, 2002). Rather than assuming English language learners have a 'target' language community and culture, International Posture offers an 'imagined' international community that they can belong to and participate in by learning and using English (Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu, 2004). Although a great deal needs to be learned about the potential of International Posture as a motivational variable in EFL learning, high international posture has been positively linked to desirable outcomes such as willingness to communicate and language proficiency and so is seen as something that is beneficial for the learner to have (Botes et al., 2020).

### **3. The Chinese context**

With an estimated 400 million English language learners and 1 million English teachers (British Council, 2024), English language clearly continues to play a critical role in people's lives in China. Proficiency in English is linked to increased career opportunities and prosperity. Despite some recent discussions concerning a de-emphasis on English in China (see for example: Shou, 2023), English remains a compulsory subject from Grade 3 Primary and is also one of the three compulsory subjects for university entrance exams.

Given the prominence of English within the education system in China and the general acceptance that the teaching of culture and language are inevitably connected, there has been comparatively little attention paid to the pedagogic treatment of culture in EFL. One exception to this is Shen Chen and Ti Thuy Le who have stressed the political nature of this issue in China:

"Foreign-language education introduces other cultures which may conflict with what is locally accepted and introduce social change rather than maintaining the national tradition. This paradox of the double-functions of foreign-language education leads to the perplexing issue of how to deal with the relations between home culture and foreign culture." (Chen & Le, 2019, p1)

Chen and Le chart the swings in attitudes to foreign influence in education from 'prohibition' (all aspects of foreign culture were banned during the decade of the Cultural Revolution), to 'substitution' (the indiscriminate adoption of foreign culture norms during the 'culture craze' period of the 1980s), to 'selection' (a more conservative approach to which aspects of foreign

culture should and should not be included in education programmes). Although accepting the important role of foreign language teaching in developing learners' intercultural communicative competence put forward by Byram, Risager and others, Chen and Le suggest an alternative model for China (termed 'Intercultural capacity') which considers the sociocultural context of the country and includes the two contrasting functions of encouraging change in individuals and allowing the maintenance of tradition and cultural identity. For Chen and Le (ibid.) the change should involve learners becoming more aware of their own and other cultures rather than conforming to native norms of communication, as suggested by competence models.

Some research into teacher and learner beliefs about English language teaching in China have revealed attitudes towards the place of culture in the classroom. Tian (2016) used a combination of detailed observation and focus groups in a qualitative study of the way in which eleven university teachers dealt with cultural content in their English classes. This revealed that the teachers consistently gave priority to the development of their students' language proficiency and that cultural topics often occurred in digressions and were rarely included purposefully in the lesson design. Where culture was covered it was generally delivered as factual information with teachers providing their own interpretation rather than offering students opportunities to discuss and reflect on issues. Teachers also tended to overgeneralise, focus only on surface features of culture and rely on a cultural comparison approach. Although they recognised the need to develop students' curiosity and understanding of foreign cultures, they felt that since this was not part of the formal summative exams, they could not devote substantial time to it.

In a study of over 1000 students and teachers of English in six Chinese universities, Liu (2018) found that both students and teachers saw native-speaker English as standard and believed that native speaker English teachers are better able to teach the culture associated with the language. This implies a very narrow essentialist view on language and culture. However, some opposition to native-speakerism could be seen from the positive attitudes of the students and teachers toward textbooks with content drawing on a variety of world cultures and Chinese culture rather than reflecting only Anglo-American culture. Among students there was a feeling that one of the major objectives of ELT is to help them to use English to express their own cultures in cross-cultural communications rather than simply learn about foreign cultures

through English (something which is emphasised in the new curriculum). The findings from a qualitative study by Fang (2022) endorse this. In focus group discussions university English teachers realized the importance of teaching about other cultures in the English classroom because it can increase students' awareness of cultural diversity and may motivate them to disseminate Chinese culture. However, they were less positive about their ability to implement this approach because the local educational system does not provide them with opportunities for enhancing the syllabus or for gaining the extensive cultural knowledge required.

Textbooks play an important role in conveying cultural representations to learners through texts, images, audio and video recordings and a wide range of tasks. Studies of textbooks being used in Chinese schools (Yuen, 2011; Lee and Li, 2020) suggest that cultural content lacks both depth and breadth. Culture is represented in a fragmentary and stereotypical way with greater emphasis on cultural products than cultural perspectives so that students are not encouraged to "go through the processes of thinking, feeling and doing, and to make comparisons between different cultures. They focus on the static cultural elements ... instead of dealing with cultural elements pertaining to values and global issues." (Lee and Li, 2019, p619). The same studies also show a significant imbalance in the cultures represented with the cultures of English-speaking western countries figuring much more often than those of Africa or Asia. A later survey of compulsory high school English language textbooks (Zhang and Liu, 2022) indicates that there may have been a significant shift in the cultural content of learning materials. This study reveals a much greater prominence of Chinese cultural representations which reflects current thinking on the importance of developing students' ability to talk and write about their own culture in English.

The most recent revision of the English curriculum for primary and junior high schools in 2022 has seen an important shift away from a focus on the development of students' overall language ability to the cultivation of their core competencies through the English subject. These core competencies (learning ability, thinking capacity, language ability and cultural awareness) are seen as intertwined and 'crucial in developing students' correct values, essential character traits, and those key skills necessary for their life-long learning and social development.' (MoE 2022, p13). Although the culture awareness competency had been

included in the 2017 curriculum for senior high schools it is given much greater prominence in the 2022 curriculum:

“Learning and using English provides an opportunity for students to learn about different cultures, conduct cross-cultural comparison, and capture the best of world cultures. It enables them to develop an awareness and ability to engage in cross-cultural communication and exchange, learn to perceive the world objectively and sensibly, and shape their international perspectives.” (MoE, 2022, p9).

The new English curriculum for primary and junior high schools (grades 3-9) is divided into three levels, with each corresponding to certain high school grades. Level 1 goals for each of the four competencies are recommended for Grades 3-4, Level 2 goals for Grades 5-6, and Level 3 goals for Grades 7-9. Looking specifically at the Cultural Awareness competency, the grade specific goals are divided into three ‘areas’: comparing and judging, adjusting and communicating, and appreciating and internalising. For each of these areas the curriculum document lists 5-7 goals at each grade level with goals expressed in terms of desired cultural attitudes and values as well as specific abilities (MoE, 2022, pp18-20). Table 1 below illustrates how for one Cultural Awareness goal, there is an attempt to build in progression from one level to the next.

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Comparing and judging	Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop an initial awareness of observing, differentiating, and comparing Chinese and foreign cultures</li> </ul>	Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop an initial awareness of observing, differentiating, and comparing similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign culture</li> </ul>	Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• establish an international perspective, and compare and judge cultural similarities and differences</li> </ul>
Adjusting and communicating	Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learn and perceive the unique expressions in English language in interpersonal communication as instructed by the teacher</li> </ul>	Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understand the etiquette of receiving people in different cultures as guided by the teacher</li> </ul>	Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understand the basic etiquette, manners, and communication styles of people in different countries</li> </ul>
Appreciating and internalising	Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify specific phenomena and things that embody Chinese and foreign cultures and correct values from pictures and short texts</li> </ul>	Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understand pictures and short texts about fine Chinese and foreign cultures, and discover and perceive the</li> </ul>	Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• appreciate the humanistic and scientific spirits and values about physical work embedded in the learned short texts</li> </ul>

		embedded philosophy of life	
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**Table 1. Excerpt from ‘Level Goals of Cultural Awareness’ (MoE, 2022, pp18-20)**

In addition to this extremely detailed specification of goals within each competency, the 2022 curriculum also introduces three broad ‘thematic contexts’, namely, “man and self”, “man and society”, and “man and nature”. These themes are further divided into numerous sub-themes for each grade level. Further detailed specifications of required curriculum content are provided for language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills and learning strategies and a wide variety of text types are listed as potential vehicles for integrating the language and cultural content strands.

“The design and implementation of teaching should be led by themes and supported by texts, encouraging students to learn language and cultural knowledge in an integrated manner through activities of learning and understanding, of applying and practicing, and of transferring and creating, so that they can ... express personal views and attitudes around the themes” (MoE, 2022, p69).

The curriculum document provides some examples of how teachers might integrate the teaching of knowledge, skills and learning strategies in a series of lessons around a particular theme. These are presented in Appendix IV in the form of ‘teaching cases’ covering different grade levels and themes. Each of these cases provides detailed lesson plans, teaching objectives, key language to be taught, texts to be exploited and ideas for independent learning and homework tasks. Only one of these cases (MoE, 2022, pp164-169) has a clear focus on a cultural theme (‘traditional festivals and cultural experiences of major countries in the world’) with the objective of helping students “understand the cultural significance of the Chinese Lantern Festival, gradually form an identification with the fine traditions of Chinese culture, and strengthen their cultural confidence” (MoE, 2022, p165).

Also included in the document is detailed information on the type of textbooks and other supplementary learning materials that teachers should use to implement the curriculum and how they should be used (MoE, 2022, pp 89-92). Textbooks must reflect the values embodied in the curriculum, including the concept of a global community, and should also develop students’ awareness of the world and of Chinese culture. Texts and activities in the textbooks should be arranged around the key curriculum themes and be varied in order to increase

learner motivation, encourage collaborative, enquiry-based learning and recognise rural-urban as well as individual differences. Textbooks should be designed to allow teachers some flexibility in their use and teachers are advised to analyse designated textbooks very carefully to decide on the best way to incorporate them into their syllabus and lesson plans, and to identify where they may need supplementing.

Teachers and schools are encouraged to develop their own supplementary materials which match the themes in the textbooks but extend them rather than duplicate content (MoE, 2022, pp92-95). Supplementary materials should contain activities which allow students to make use of their existing knowledge and experience and to work collaboratively and creatively. The curriculum document stresses the need for these materials to be of high quality and effective but with a focus on simplicity and practicality so that they help pupils learn without increasing their learning 'burden' (MoE, 2022, p95).

There is much to be admired in the way the new curriculum for primary and junior high schools (2022) situates culture as an integral component of English language teaching and learning. Building on innovations introduced in the 2018 curriculum for senior high schools, it includes cultural awareness as one of the four key competencies which students need to develop as part of language learning. It attaches importance to fostering students' curiosity towards world cultures and the ability to critically evaluate and compare different cultural practices, products and perspectives. It also aims to encourage the development of intercultural communication skills and the knowledge and confidence to talk about aspects of Chinese cultures to others. Through its content and the teaching and learning approaches it promotes, the curriculum aims to put students at the centre and to inculcate 'humanistic' values such as respect for others and collaboration.

However, the new curriculum undoubtedly presents teachers with considerable challenges. As Lei (2020) and Lei and Medwell (2022) comment in relation to previous curricula revisions, the new curriculum will require teachers to make a substantial shift in their attitudes and practice if they are to meet its expectations. Teachers will need to be more creative in making curriculum choices and developing their own activities and materials rather than "strictly comply with textbook-based, top-down curriculum delivery" (Lei and Medwell, 2022, p3). Even if teachers understand and accept the ideals of the curriculum, they may not see it as

practicable given their current workload and the pressure on them to teach only what is assessed in exams.

Given the prominence given to culture in the new English curriculum and the expectation that teachers will integrate the development of cultural knowledge and awareness with the teaching of language, it is important to learn more from teachers and learners on how they feel about this. Although there have been several relatively recent studies into teacher and student beliefs on culture in the English classroom and into how culture should be covered in English textbooks (see discussion above), most of these have focused on university rather than secondary school contexts. To learn more about the views of junior high school teachers and pupils on the integration of language and culture, surveys were carried out across a large number of junior high schools in Chongqing Municipality. This study was part of a British Council supported project which aims to develop a model for culture-themed English language teaching and learning materials for schools in less advantaged areas of southwest China.

## **4. The Research**

### **(i) Methodology**

This study considered both students and teachers. 4339 students were recruited for the study (2305 female, 2033 male; Median age = 13.51 years old, SD = 1.05 years). Students were recruited from grades seven (n = 1373), eight (n = 1600), and nine (n = 1365) from 28 public middle schools in the region of Chongqing, China. They were all L1 users of Chinese. At the time of data collection they were learning English as part of their school curriculum.

Additionally, 330 middle school teachers from the same region were recruited (265 female, 65 male). Teachers varied in length of teaching experience (1-5 years = 21.2%, 6-10 years = 17.6%, 11-15 years = 17.3%, 16+ years = 43.9%), qualification (high school certificate = 1.8%, vocational college = 0.9%, undergraduate degree = 85.5%, master's degree = 10.9%, PhD = 0.9%), and degree specialisation (3.94% specialised in subjects other than English, education, or cognate subjects).

### **(ii) Research Instruments**

A questionnaire was used to collect data from the student sample. Likert and semantic differential scale items were employed to target two main constructs, international posture (Yashima, 2009) and attitudes to English. Items in the international posture multi-item scale were largely adapted from instruments developed by Yashima (2009) and Nishida and Yashima (2017); while those in the attitude to English scale lent on the work of Taylor and Marsden (2014). The scales were piloted with 30 learners from the target population and reliability analysis was conducted. Based on this analysis, a number of items were removed or rewritten. A posteriori reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha statistic was also conducted once the main data set had been collected. This analysis indicated that both scales had excellent internal consistency (see DeVellis, 2003): International Posture (17 items)  $\alpha = .91$ , Attitude to English (8 items)  $\alpha = .94$ . Additional areas targeted included questions on access to digital technology at home, perceived level of English, and key areas of interest in world cultures.

A separate questionnaire was used to collect data from the teachers, consisting of Likert-scale and multiple-choice items, as well as open questions. The following areas were targeted: perceived level of English for teaching, beliefs about native-speakerism, perceived cultural competence, limitations of current teaching context, beliefs about the role of culture in language teaching, and perceived obstacles to integrating supplementary culture-themed activities into class. The core questionnaire was made up of four multi-item scales. Scales were developed in house and underwent a priori testing with 15 teachers from the target population and reliability analysis was carried out. Based on this analysis, several items were modified. After data collection, reliability analysis was again conducted, and underperforming items were removed before individual items were collapsed into multi-item scales. The scales and their associated alpha values were as follows: perceived level of English for teaching (6 items)  $\alpha = .95$ ; beliefs about native-speakerism (5 items)  $\alpha = .72$ ; perceived cultural competence (4 items)  $\alpha = .61$ ; beliefs about the role of culture in language teaching (7 items)  $\alpha = .85$ . The perceived knowledge of global culture scale had both too few items and poor reliability and is not reported in this paper; all other scales had acceptable to excellent reliability (DeVellis, 2003).

### **(iii) Data analysis**

Following reliability analysis, individual items were collapsed into multi-item scales and descriptive statistics were computed in SPSS. The open questions were manually coded using an inductive approach. The participants gave brief answers, sometimes just one or two words, so it was not practical to conduct an extended qualitative analysis. Thus, we ran a simple frequency analysis to determine commonalities in the dataset. This suited the ultimate goal of the project (i.e., supporting the development of teaching materials) as it provided popular topics around which teaching units could be framed.

#### **(iv) Procedure**

Both the student and teacher questionnaires were initially developed in English, before being translated into Chinese by two L1 Chinese users proficient in English. Translations were checked against the original English tools by a further three L1 users of Chinese with advanced English knowledge. The instruments were then transferred to an electronic platform to be distributed to participants. All items were externally piloted with participants from the target population of the main study. This piloting involved both a trial of the items and the facility for respondents to rate the comprehensibility of each item. Four items from the student instrument and two items from the teacher instrument were found to be difficult to comprehend and were rewritten. The final questionnaires were distributed to public schools via the Chongqing Board of Education. Schools were given access to the instruments, with students completing the relevant questionnaire during class time, taking as much time as they needed. They were monitored by teachers and could ask clarification questions at any time. They took an average of 10.02 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Participating teachers completed their questionnaire outside of class time and at their own pace. The average completion time was 8.03 minutes. The study was run in accordance with ethical approval, with all participants (i.e., students and teachers) completing the approved consent form before taking part in the study and individual schools giving consent prior to data collection.

#### **(v) Limitations**

The research was conducted during a period when the COVID-19 pandemic was still influencing teachers, learners, and schools. It was hoped that as well as the surveys, focus

groups, interviews and classroom observations would also be conducted to gather further rich information but this proved impossible in the circumstances.

## **(vi) Results**

Teachers (n=330) self-reported their English language proficiency on a ten-point scale (1 = extremely poor, almost no knowledge, 10 = extremely good, almost native like) as follows: reading: M = 6.77 (SD = 1.57), writing: M = 6.35 (SD = 1.57), listening: M = 6.50 (SD = 1.68), speaking: M = 6.22 (SD = 1.63). Although this data may not give an accurate picture of the respondents' actual proficiency, it is interesting to note that their perceived proficiency in the productive language skills, and particularly in speaking, was significantly lower than in the receptive skills. It is also noteworthy that some participants rated their proficiency in the productive skills considerably lower than the mean values, with ratings of three or lower accounting for 4.5% of the writing data, 5.4% and 6% of the speaking data.

Respondents also answered a series of questions on their beliefs about native speaker (NS) English and whether it provides the best model for learners and teachers. On a five-point scale (1 = NS English is not the best model, 5 = NS English is the best model) the mean value was 3.40 (SD=.74) which indicates that there is a relatively strong belief among teachers in the conventional native speaker paradigm. This corroborates findings from other studies on NS ideology in Chinese ELT (Liu, 2018; Huang, 2019). There could be various reasons for this shared belief in the primacy of NS English. Teachers have generally been trained around the NS model and the textbooks they use to teach and the tests used to evaluate their students also adopt NS English as standard (Yu and Liu, 2022). This belief in NS English being the best model might also explain why teacher's ratings of their own writing and speaking proficiencies were relatively low.

Respondents used another 5-point scale to indicate whether they felt their own English was at a suitable level to teach the subject (1 = not sufficient, 5 = sufficient). The mean score was 3.88 (SD = .79). This indicates a fairly high level of confidence that their own language level was adequate for the classroom, despite their apparent belief in NS English as the best model.

Results showed that only just over 19% of teachers responding to the survey had travelled to another country and only 7.5% had spent longer than one month living outside of China. From this it is safe to assume that relatively few teachers have had direct experience of other countries and cultures. However, there is a clear feeling among junior high school English teachers that culture should be an integral part of the English curriculum. In answers to questions about the desirability of introducing students to foreign cultures as part of their English lessons, there was a mean response of 3.77 (SD = .38) on a 5-point scale (1 = I don't/don't want to include foreign cultures, 5 = I do/do want to include foreign cultures).

Despite this willingness to incorporate culture in their language teaching, teachers identified some key potential obstacles to this (see Table 2 below).

Issue	% of respondents who cited issue (n = 330)
My knowledge of international culture	53.6
The amount of teaching content I currently have to cover	52.7
The availability of resources	47.6
Learner motivation	43.3
My English language level	35.5
Preparation time	26.7

**Table 2: Most common issues preventing integration of culture into language teaching**

The most cited impediments to teachers introducing content related to world cultures were their own lack of knowledge, the already full curriculum and the lack of appropriate resources. These were perceived as more problematic than teachers' own language level or the time required to prepare classes.

Students responding to the survey (n = 4338) self-reported their English language proficiency on the same ten-point scale as for teachers (1 = extremely poor, almost no knowledge, 10 = extremely good, almost native like) as follows: reading: M = 5.02 (SD = 2.38), writing: M = 4.66 (SD = 2.38), listening: M = 5.22 (SD = 2.45), speaking: M = 4.73 (SD = 2.41). This mirrors the results from the survey of teachers, with students rating their productive skills lower than their receptive skills. The general attitude of junior high school students to learning English is quite positive. Responses to 8 questions on a 5-point scale (1 = negative attitude, 5 = positive

attitude) resulted in a mean of 3.65 (SD = 1.00). Students also had positive 'International Posture'. Responses to the 17 questions related to this resulted in a mean of 3.65 (SD = 1.00) measured on the same 5-point scale. This indicates that students have generally positive feelings towards foreign countries, the people who live there and their cultures. The most common aspects of foreign cultures which respondents said they would like to learn more about are shown in Table 3 below.

<b>Aspect of culture</b>	<b>% of students who mentioned (n = 4339)</b>
History and heritage	25
Food and dining	22
People and lifestyles	18
Customs and etiquette	17
Science and technology	10

**Table 3: Aspects of culture students would like to learn about**

Other cultural topics which were popular with the students were festivals, architecture and buildings, sport, politics, education and films and TV.

### **(vii) Discussion**

The main conclusion drawn from these results is that junior high school students and their teachers are positive about the integration of cultural topics with language teaching in the English curriculum. Students' attitude to learning English is also positive as is their international posture which indicates that they are motivated not only to study the language but also to use it to learn more about other countries, people, and cultures. The majority of teachers have little or no direct international experience which may explain why they feel that their lack of knowledge of other cultures might make the integration of culture and language teaching challenging. Interestingly, teachers tend to regard native speaker English as the best model for them and their students. This may explain why both teachers and students consider their speaking and writing skills to be less well developed than reading and listening. Despite their positive feelings about using the English subject to teach students

about world cultures and devoting time and space to this in lessons and learning materials, teachers believe that they currently lack both the resources and room in the curriculum to do this.

As we have noted above, the 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education in China affords a very prominent position to the development of learners' cultural awareness by making this one of the four 'core competencies'. Although the results of this research suggest that both teachers and students welcome this increased emphasis on culture in the curriculum, it is also clear that it presents significant challenges to those who will need to implement it in practice.

## **5. Recommendations on integrating cultural awareness and English language development in junior high school classrooms.**

### **(i) Understanding the curriculum**

The 2022 curriculum for English proposes a new integrated approach to teaching culture in the language classroom. This "includes giving students a world view, cultural awareness and developing positive humanistic values" (MoE 2022, p9). This is a significant change for teachers who may perceive their role as delivering language knowledge and skills rather than helping shape their learners' awareness and understanding of world cultures and "shape their world perspectives" (MoE 2022, p9). Teachers will need help in understanding this approach and what it will mean for their classroom practice. This understanding will be best achieved by teachers themselves meeting at school level and sharing their interpretations of the curriculum changes rather than through 'top-down' interventions from experts who may be far removed from the classroom context.

### **(ii) Textbooks**

Teachers and students will continue to rely on published textbooks to provide the main content for teaching and learning. It is therefore vital that these include the kind of texts, images and activities which will facilitate the development of the core cultural awareness competency in students as well as their English knowledge and proficiency. Textbooks need to go beyond a surface approach to cultural content which relies on understanding and

memorising facts. Instead, it should provide students with opportunities to learn about and reflect on cultural practices, perspectives and values from around the world and make comparisons between them and aspects of Chinese culture. The writers of textbooks should avoid content which reinforces an essentialist view of culture through the inclusion of cultural stereotypes in texts and images. Including examples from a wide variety of countries including those where English is not an official language or the first language of the majority, and from minority cultures within those countries, will introduce students to the richness and diversity of world culture. It is also important that the textbooks use examples from different ethnic groups and cultures in China since “effectively understanding other cultures requires adequate comprehension of one’s own home culture” (Liu and Fang, 2017, p33).

Teacher guides should also give teachers very clear guidance on how textbooks should be used and where they can be supplemented with activities and materials which enhance the cultural content. Wherever possible teachers should be consulted on textbook content and involved in piloting to ensure that they actually meet the needs of learners.

### **(iii) Supplementary materials**

Since textbooks need to cover all key aspects of the curriculum and give adequate space to more traditional language input and practice exercises, there is a need for specifically culture-themed supplementary materials. These should be closely aligned with the grammatical and lexical syllabus within the textbook(s) for each grade level and also with the three broad themes of the National Curriculum, but will include texts and tasks which encourage awareness and critical thinking about aspects of culture likely to be of interest to students of a particular age. Supplementary materials should adopt an integrated skills approach, developing receptive skills (listening/reading/watching) via reading texts or short videos on cultural topics and then moving towards productive skills (speaking/writing) with learners discussing and personalising that content. As stated in the curriculum document itself, these additional materials should not replicate the textbook content but should allow learners to extend their understanding and further develop their language and thinking skills through engaging, learner-centred activities.

Teachers should be encouraged to develop these supplementary materials themselves and be given the opportunity, time, resources and support to enable this. Teachers are well placed to personalise and contextualise materials so that they reflect cultural topics relevant to their pupils' life experiences, interests, and abilities. They will also be able to ensure that the materials are at a suitable language level for their learners and practical within the constraints of the classroom and the timetable.

#### **(iv) Teacher training**

Pre-service and in-service training will be needed to help teachers understand and implement the new curriculum. Recent research has shown that teachers of English in schools in China express a strong need for training and materials that support and link to their current curriculum and textbook content (British Council, 2022). The same research also indicated that teachers prioritise professional development activities that are practical, and directly related to the challenges they face in their own classrooms. This professional development is best achieved through teacher research and discussion groups and peer observation rather than top-down formal lectures.

#### **(v) Further research**

As the new curriculum begins to be implemented in schools, it will be important to observe how teachers approach the cultural awareness component and investigate how their own 'cultural confidence' influences their teaching. It would also be interesting to examine in more detail teachers' views on the primacy of the native speaker model and the effect this may have on their self-efficacy. Further studies of Chinese learners' motivation to learn English, could also help understanding of the role 'imagined international communities' play in their international posture.

#### **(vi) Acknowledgements**

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## Appendix 1.

### Survey of junior high school English teachers: questionnaire (translated from Chinese)

#### Teaching English and Foreign Culture – What do you think?

We invite you to participate in this survey of English language teaching and to explore the integration of global cultures in English classrooms in China. The questionnaire is anonymous, and there is no correct answer, so please answer carefully according to your own situation. Thank you very much for your help!

#### Part A

In this section, please select the level of your agreement with the following statements. (1-24) Please do not miss any questions.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

Here is an example:

**Example. I like teaching English.**

If you love to teach English you should answer like this.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I like teaching English.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. My knowledge of English is sufficient to support me in my English teacher study programme and the continuous development of my teaching career.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I have sufficient knowledge of English to teach English.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I am confident in my knowledge of English.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I am confident in my ability to use English.	1	2	3	4	5

5.	I can provide a very good example of English for my students.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I think I'm ready to teach English.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I can use English as the language of instruction.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	For the purpose of teaching English, I believe that my spoken language should be like that of a native English speaker.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	The English spoken by Chinese is not authentic.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	American or British English is the best English for students.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	I'm embarrassed if I speak English with an accent.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Native English speakers can provide the best English paradigm.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	I feel like I have enough knowledge of world cultures.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	I am satisfied with my current level of cultural knowledge.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	I will help students learn about foreign cultures	1	2	3	4	5
16.	I used my knowledge of world cultures when teaching English.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	Integrating world cultures into an English classroom is a challenge.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	I can use technology devices in the classroom. (e.g. computer, video)	1	2	3	4	5
19.	I would like to incorporate culturally relevant teaching gains into my English classroom	1	2	3	4	5
20.	I need to learn more about foreign cultures	1	2	3	4	5
21.	I don't know enough about foreign cultures at the moment.	1	2	3	4	5
22.	My classroom teaching incorporates elements of foreign cultures.	1	2	3	4	5
23.	It is important to teach foreign cultures to students in English courses.	1	2	3	4	5
24.	I will introduce students to the outside world.	1	2	3	4	5

## **Part B**

25. Which of the following would be the biggest problem you face when incorporating culture-focused activities into your English classroom?

(Please select the three most difficult for you)

- Preparation time
- The amount of teaching content I have to cover at the moment
- Learner motivation
- My motivation
- Availability of resources
- My knowledge of international cultures
- My level of English
- I am confident in using technological devices
- Educational policy
- Parents' perceptions
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Part C**

26. What topics of world culture would students be most interested in?
27. If you could, how would you improve your English lessons?
28. Can you use a projector in class? (Yes/No)
29. Can you present audio-visual materials in class? (Yes/No)
30. If you answered "yes" to question 29, what technical equipment would you use to display audiovisual material?
31. Is the internet available to use in your classroom?

### **Part D**

32. What training have you received in teaching English?
33. How long have you been teaching English?
34. Have you ever travelled abroad?
35. Have you ever lived abroad?
36. If you answered "yes" to question 35, how long have you lived abroad?
37. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
38. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_
39. Please self-rate your English proficiency:

**1 = Very poor, with little knowledge at all; 10 = Very good, almost at the level of a native speaker**

40.	Reading	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
41.	Writing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
42.	Listening	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
43.	Speaking	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Thank you very much for your help!

## Appendix 2.

### Survey of Junior high school pupils: questionnaire (translated from Chinese)

#### English Classes – What do you think?

*We would like to ask you to help me by answering the following questions concerning English. We are conducting this survey as part of an international project to make English classes better. This is not a test; there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers. You do not even have to write your name. Please give your answers honestly. Thank you very much for your help!*

#### **PART A:**

*In this section, please select the level of your agreement with the following statements. (1-19) Please do not miss any questions.*

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

**Here is an example:**

**Example. I like learning English.**

If you love to learn English you should answer like this.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I like teaching English.	1	2	3	4	5

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1	Learning about foreign culture is interesting.	1	2	3	4	5
2	It's important to learn English so I can know about foreign cultures.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I would like to travel abroad.	1	2	3	4	5
4	English is just a school subject for me.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I want to make friends with international people.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I want to avoid talking with foreigners.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I would talk to an international student if there was one at my school.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I would feel somewhat uncomfortable if a foreigner moved in next door.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I feel connected to the world.	1	2	3	4	5
10	I would rather stay in China than travel abroad.	1	2	3	4	5
11	What happens overseas does not have much to do with my life.	1	2	3	4	5
12	I often read or watch videos about foreign countries.	1	2	3	4	5
13	I often play computer games about foreign countries.	1	2	3	4	5
14	I talk about foreign countries with my family/friends.	1	2	3	4	5
15	I want to share my thoughts with people from other parts of the world.	1	2	3	4	5
16	I have ideas about international issues, such as the environment, that I want to share with the world.	1	2	3	4	5
17	I would not like to communicate my ideas to people from other countries.	1	2	3	4	5
18	I would like to tell the world about my culture.	1	2	3	4	5
19	I would like to exchange my ideas with people from other countries.	1	2	3	4	5

**PART B:**

*In this part, express your feelings about studying English. Please use the scales below. These have opposites at each end. Place an X on one of the lines, indicating how you feel. Remember that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers. Be sure to click on every scale.*

**Example:**

*If you find speaking in English quite difficult, but very interesting, you would answer like this.*

**Speaking English is...**

Easy				X		Difficult
Interesting	X					Uninteresting

**Questions:**

How do you feel, in general, about studying English?

20	I have fun							I get bored
21	I feel engaged							I feel disengaged
22	I look forward to it							I don't look forward to it
23	I take it seriously							I don't take it seriously
24	It's easy for me							It's difficult for me
25	It's important for me							It's unimportant for me

**PART C:**

- 26. Can you think of any situation(s) in the future when knowing English might be good for you?
- 27. Write **three** aspects of foreign culture you would like to learn more about.
- 28. What would you like to learn more about in your English classes?
- 29. What things do you like to do in your spare time?

**PART D:**

- 30. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
- 31. Write your gender \_\_\_\_\_

Please now provide self-ratings for your level of proficiency in English:

1 = really poor → 10 = really good

- 32. Reading:      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10
- 33. Writing:      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10
- 34. Listening:      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10
- 35. Speaking:      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

36. Which technology do you have access to at home?

- Computer       Tablet       Smartphone       Other: \_\_\_\_\_

37. Are there any other comments you want to make about learning English?

Thank you very much for your help!