

# Research on the Cultural Awareness Integration in Senior High School English Teaching in China

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## Abstract

Culture is an important part of language teaching and learning. In China's senior high schools, English teachers should not only impart language knowledge but also pay attention to its cultural connotations to strengthen the cultivation of students' cultural awareness. In this way, students can attain their all-round development and increase their understanding of both Chinese and Western cultural differences. This paper discusses current teaching and learning problems from teachers' and students' perspectives. Some suggestions are brought up to improve cultural awareness integration by using some specific examples. This paper tries to integrate English vocabulary, unit themes, reading, and writing into English classroom teaching to cultivate senior high school students' cultural awareness.

## Keywords

Cultural Awareness Integration, Senior High School, English Teaching

## 1. Introduction and Literature Review

“The Common Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition)” (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018) lists cultural awareness as one of the four core elements of English subject literacy, emphasizing that culture is an important part of language teaching. For a long time, many scholars have made meaningful explorations and studies on how to integrate the cultivation of students' cultural awareness into English teaching in senior high school. Zhang (2020: pp. 28-32) discussed strategies for cultivating cultural awareness in English reading teaching; Xu and Nan (2021: pp. 136-141) analyzed the cultural

contents involved in senior high school English textbooks and proposed specific teaching strategies for teachers to cultivate students' cultural awareness when using newly-edited English textbooks; Cheng and Ding (2021: pp. 255-256) put forward a program to strengthen the cultivation of cultural awareness in English reading learning from the aspects of students, teachers, and schools in view of the situation of belittling culture and emphasizing language in English reading; Shi (2022: pp. 40-42) explored three methods to develop students' cultural confidence in senior high school English teaching from the perspective of cultural confidence.

Most of the previous studies focused on how to teach foreign culture in high school English teaching, but there were few studies on how to integrate students' cultural awareness into actual classroom teaching and studies on combining every aspect of English teaching and learning to develop students' cultural awareness are even less. Especially, English teachers, as the leading roles in senior high school classrooms, should consciously explore the cultural connotations in the teaching materials, integrate the cultivation of cultural awareness into every classroom teaching, and guide students to take the initiative to learn the cultures of English-speaking countries.

## 2. Data and Methodology

In this paper, the quantitative method is used to select some examples from the three compulsory English textbooks (Book 1, Book 2, and Book 3) of senior high school published by People's Education Press in China. Some examples are from the papers of the College Entrance Examination in China. The qualitative method is used to classify all the teaching materials in the textbooks on the basis of different cultural aspects, such as history, sports, festivals, tourism, etc.

By analyzing the current situation of cultivating cultural awareness in senior high school English teaching, suggestions on how to cultivate students' cultural awareness in English teaching are brought out from the aspects of English vocabulary, unit themes, reading, and writing, hoping that it will be inspiring for English teachers.

## 3. Current Situation of Cultural Consciousness Integration in Senior High School English Teaching in China

Both students and teachers of a second language need to understand cultural differences, to perceive them, to appreciate them, and to respect them. However, the fact is that English teachers pay too much attention to students' learning of language and grammar, which are two main aspects reflected in the test papers of the College Entrance Examination. In China, English teaching in senior high school mainly depends on teachers' comprehension of foreign cultures in English-speaking countries.

### 3.1. Teachers' Perspective

In recent years, more and more English teachers have been actively exploring the

integration of cultural awareness and have spent much effort on teaching design. Instead of instilling knowledge points into students, they have begun to pay attention to cultural understanding and devote themselves to the development of students' comprehensive quality. However, when teaching grammar, parts of speech, sentences, and other skills, some teachers only stay at the superficial level of cultural knowledge, that is, telling students "what" and ignoring "why" (Xiao & Li, 2019: pp. 17-21). For example, when it comes to foreign cities and geographical locations, only a brief introduction will be made, and students lack subjective feelings and real situational experience of their cultures. Teachers should dig more into cultural elements, such as historical background, cultural values, emotional attitudes, social etiquette, customs, and other contents, which are the deep connotations of cultural background. In the process of teaching cultural awareness integration, the lack of scientific and humanized evaluation methods and valuable theoretical guidance will affect the final teaching effect. The teaching of cultural knowledge is unidirectional and fragmented, which can not cultivate students' deep understanding of cultural awareness.

Culture is a way of life. Culture is the context within which we exist, think, feel, and relate to others. If Chinese students can compare the foreign cultures they learn in class to relevant Chinese cultures, they may have a better understanding of foreign cultures. In the process of teaching and learning, English teachers should not only pay attention to the introduction of British and American culture but also selectively inculcate the excellent traditional Chinese culture. On the other hand, due to the lack of Chinese cultural input, students can not fully express Chinese cultural knowledge in English fluently. It is contradictory to the training goals of "going abroad" and "improving the soft power" of Chinese culture. Cultural expression is not only the basis for building cultural confidence, but also one of the goals of education. In English teaching, teachers should consider how to let students tell Chinese stories well in English so that the world can better understand and know China.

### 3.2. Students' Perspective

Stevick cautioned that learners can feel alienated in the process of learning a second language, alienated from people in their domestic culture, the target culture, and from themselves (Brown, 2001). For high school students in their adolescence, foreign cultures are very different from the environment and culture they live in, and when they are exposed to such language and culture in English classes, their attitudes will show two extreme trends. One attitude is to excessively worship alien cultures. They regard foreign cultures as an ideal pursuit because of their lack of ability to distinguish the foreign cultures they learn in classes. They advocate freedom, long for independence, and advocate the liberation of personality. In this case, they have no identification of their own country's excellent culture and will only blindly exaggerate the advantages of foreign cultures. The other is a kind of conservative attitude. They value the culture of their own country so much that

they will refuse to accept the culture of other countries.

These two attitudes are not beneficial to Chinese students' learning English and its culture. It is not good for them to develop a reasonable attitude toward foreign cultures. In the teaching process, English teachers should guide students to treat the heterogeneous culture in an impartial manner, and need to be sensitive to students' fragility by using some techniques to promote their cultural understanding.

## **4. Suggestions to Cultural Awareness Integration in Teaching**

### **4.1. Digging the Cultural Connotation of English Words**

For Chinese students, learning English often begins with learning English words. Compared with Chinese, English words are completely different in form (spelling and pronunciation). More importantly, the culture behind the English words is different from that of Chinese. Therefore, teachers should consciously guide students to understand the culture contained in English words. For example, in teaching *eggplant* in Unit 5, Book 1, teachers should introduce more about the culture of *eggplant*, such as its history, color, shape, types, etc. The eggplant is native to India and the Arabic region.

The name *eggplant* was adopted by Europeans in the mid-18th century because the round, white-skinned eggplant varieties looked like goose eggs. Later, purple eggplant gradually appeared, but the name has not changed. The round purple eggplant is called the American eggplant, while the long purple eggplant is called the Japanese eggplant. Teachers can also ask students to find different types of eggplant in the grocery market.

In senior high school English teaching, teachers can use the method of vocabulary introduction to analyze the hidden cultural knowledge in words and texts for students so as to help them understand and absorb the cultural differences between English-speaking countries.

### **4.2. Extending the Cultural Awareness of Unit Theme in the Textbook**

The acquisition of students' language knowledge is inseparable from the mastery of cultural knowledge, and the lack of cultural knowledge will affect students' language understanding and learning (Zhu, 2017). The new curriculum standard in 2017 defines "culture" as Chinese and foreign customs, traditional customs, ways of life, literature and art, history, geography, norms of behavior, values, and ways of thinking. The reading materials in the textbook are full of cultural connotations. Without understanding the culture in these materials, it is impossible to develop students' reading comprehension abilities. In the three English compulsory textbooks of the new senior high school, there is a wide range of themes, such as characters, history, geography, literature, art, etc., which is conducive to expanding students' international cultural vision, fostering cross-cultural awareness, promoting understanding of international culture, and more importantly, cultivating students' correct cultural values and enhancing their self-confidence in local

culture. For example, Unit 4 in the new compulsory book 2 is *History and Traditions*, teachers can explore the cultural differences between Chinese and English, introduce the fine traditional cultures and customs of China, collect relevant proverbs, and make a comparison between British and American customs and Chinese customs.

Integrative teaching based on unit themes is one of the characteristics of the new curriculum. On the one hand, teachers can guide students to explore the cultural connotation in the teaching materials and further expand it by utilizing the historical background and supplementing other cultural knowledge in order to help students understand the cultural value and significance of culture (Wang, 2009: pp. 70-72). For example, the *Reading and Thinking* part of Unit 5 in the new compulsory book 2 is about the musical elements of the choir. After guiding them to learn the knowledge points, teachers can supplement some popular rappers and songs, and carry out cultural activities to enrich students' cultural experience. On the other hand, on the basis of the unit theme and students' cultural background knowledge, teachers can expand relevant Chinese cultural knowledge. In different teaching sessions, teachers integrate extracurricular resources that incorporate elements of Chinese culture in a timely and appropriate manner, so as to realize in-depth language learning, i.e., the integration of language, culture, and thinking. In combination with Chinese cultural knowledge related to the theme of the unit, teachers organize corresponding activities of cultural learning to expand the height, breadth and depth of students' understanding of Chinese culture and enhance their cultural identity. In addition, teachers can also help students understand the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and grasp the similarities and differences between different cultures through the comparison of Chinese and Western cultures. While learning from excellent foreign cultures, they can build up their confidence in Chinese traditional culture.

### 4.3. Cultivating Students' Cultural Awareness in Reading and Writing

College entrance examination is one of the goals of English language study. Examinations are concentrated tests of students' grasp of English knowledge. It is found that the questions in the examinations in the past years involved the examination of students' mastery of language and cultural knowledge. Reading and writing are two important sections that account for 90 points out of a total of 150 in the examination.

The objectives of English reading teaching in senior high school are to enable students to judge the characteristics of different genres and to understand the core ideas and attitudes in the reading materials. In order to cultivate students' intercultural awareness, when setting teaching objectives, teachers should ask students to analyze the values of the reading materials on the basis of mastering the vocabulary, grammar, and other linguistic knowledge of the texts. At the same time, by comparing the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, teachers can

help students form a good accumulation of knowledge about the cultures and gradually develop a sense of cultural integration, so as to improve students' abilities of learning, judging, and cross-cultural communicating, and language comprehension.

In the process of teaching English writing, teachers can also implement the input of cultural awareness and train students' ability to express different cultures in their own words. Teachers can focus on this goal by summarizing some fixed collocations of cultural content with high frequency based on the word blocks and sentence patterns of the themes in each unit, writing them into a number of logically related sentences, and then linking them together to form an essay. When the training changes from quantitative accumulation to qualitative leap, students will really understand by analogy, flexibly extract language elements, and appropriately integrate them with cultural awareness, so as to improve the content and quality of their writing. In this process, teachers can gradually train students in diversified cultural writing according to different linguistic situations in accordance with the ideas of word formation, sentence expressions, writing layout, and comprehensive application of grammar, helping students realize the process of cultural output from understanding to practical application. For example, in the English test papers for the college entrance examination of 2017, the writing section is about teaching your English friend to learn Chinese. Candidates' task is to write a letter to tell him the plan for the next class, and the study content is Tang poetry, and ask him to understand the history of the Tang Dynasty in advance. Actually, in Unit 3 Book 3, diverse cultures have been discussed. If students have been organized to introduce Chinese traditional culture in English, such as Chinese food, clothing, literature, history, etc., and relevant vocabulary and customary expressions have been summarized and required to grasp, then the writing will be very easy.

#### **4.4. Constructing Student-Centered Learning Mode**

Generally, teachers are the organizers and guides of classroom teaching. First of all, in order to cultivate students' cultural awareness, it is necessary for teachers to change their traditional views, appropriately change the classroom teaching mode, and allow students to play principal roles in the classroom. As evaluators, facilitators and guides, teachers should focus on the students' own exploration, learning and practice. Secondly, it is necessary to enhance the cultivation of students' subjective initiative to take specific tasks as guidance to develop students' abilities to solve problems in certain situations (Huang, 2018: p. 88). For example, when explaining scenic spots in Unit 1 Book 2, teachers can ask students to look for some information about foreign scenic spots independently and search for some literature about the local scenic spots. On the basis of this information, teachers conduct such activities as English corner or speech contests to encourage students' positive participation in the class. Finally, it is necessary to enrich the evaluation methods and conduct a comprehensive evaluation in a scientific, humanized and

fair way, such as conducting a test of cultural knowledge in the form of conventional objective questions. The cultural communication scenes can be set up to examine students' intercultural communication abilities. In addition, teachers can also play some authentic English movies with related reading exercises to stimulate their learning enthusiasm, encourage them to know different cultures, and establish a sense of identity among different cultures.

## 5. Conclusion

Culture is the cornerstone of a country and a nation. It will not be enough to simply learn a language without paying attention to the culture it represents and conveys. When using a language, it is also impossible to achieve the purpose of effective communication without understanding the culture it connotes. English teachers should make reasonable use of teaching materials, improve teaching methods, and compare and analyze the differences between Chinese and Western cultures in various aspects so that learners can better understand the historical origins and values of different cultures and properly cope with the collision between Chinese and Western ideas and cultures.

In this paper, we have presented some suggestions on how to develop students' cultural awareness during the process of learning English. For teachers, it is still necessary to implement these measures in future teaching practice, not only to teach students the English language but also to guide them to grasp foreign cultures. Students should actively learn foreign cultures, consciously understand foreign cultures, and critically accept foreign cultures. In the future, more research in this area will be carried out to better serve the English teaching of senior high schools in China and cultivate students' cultural awareness.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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