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Mapping Intercultural Trajectories: Chinese Secondary School Learners' Standpoints on the Cultivation of Intercultural Awareness in English Education



HENG ZHANG^a

WEI LUN WONG^b (Corresponding Author)

HUAN YIK LEE^c

WARID MIHAT^d

^a*Faculty of Educational Sciences & Technology,
University of Technology Malaysia, Malaysia*

^b*Faculty of Education, The National University of
Malaysia, Malaysia
colinw@ukm.edu.my*

^c*Language Academy, University of Technology
Malaysia, Malaysia*

^d*Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi
MARA Cawangan Kelantan, Malaysia*

Abstract

With the intensification of globalisation and international exchange, intercultural communicative ability has become a focal point in English as a foreign language education in Chinese secondary schools. However, recent studies have indicated that the developmental construct of intercultural awareness is sometimes conflated with intercultural communicative competence. This leads to ambiguity in defining appropriate learning objectives. Using a sequential explanatory research design, this study surveyed 200 learners, followed by an interview with three learners. Questionnaire data were summarised using descriptive statistics, and thematic coding was used for analysing the interview transcripts. The results indicate that learners have positive attitudes towards cultural diversity (mean = 4.12) but fairly poor cultural knowledge (mean = 2.73) and low behavioural engagement (mean = 2.45). The thematic analysis highlights three barriers: a persistent grammar–translation orientation reinforced by exam pressure, fragmented “culture bites” offering little communicative value and showcase lessons disconnected from daily practice. The results highlight a disconnect between what the national curriculum aspires to achieve and what actually happens in classrooms. The material should include dialogue and recommendation-based materials and need to be supplemented with reflective journals and performance-based tasks to enable reflection and to promote aspects of authentic cultural interaction. Thus, it can enhance

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the development of intercultural awareness and provide some practical implications for promoting intercultural learning in Chinese secondary education.

Keywords: intercultural awareness, intercultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, Chinese secondary education, English as a foreign language

Introduction

Globalisation has significantly transformed the requirements for foreign language learning. Learners are now expected to develop a sensitivity to cultural diversity and global perspectives (Baker, 2012; Galloway & Rose, 2015). Hence, intercultural competence (IC) has been widely recognised as a central goal of English language education (Deardorff, 2006; Gao, 2019; Xu, 2025). In China, this orientation is institutionalised through the National English Curriculum Standards (NECS) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020a). It explicitly emphasises intercultural awareness (IA) [跨文化意识], which includes knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Despite these policy intentions, significant disconnects between theory and classroom practice remain. Researchers have observed a gap between government advocacy for integrating intercultural elements into English language classes and the limited extent to which these aims are realised in practice (Sun, 2017; Wu, 2024). In many classrooms, cultural content is presented in fragmented or superficial forms, such as isolated “culture notes” without opportunities for deeper reflection or actions consistent with intercultural learning (Liu, 2020; Xu, 2025). Furthermore, the contrast between demonstration lessons that highlight cultural performance and regular lessons focused on examination preparation further constrains the systematic integration of intercultural awareness (IA) into the curriculum (Gao, 2019; Wu, 2024).

Recently, textbook reform has also aimed to facilitate the integration of intercultural teaching. Although the reform has emphasised that cultural knowledge, emotional attitudes and behavioural skills should be integrated into the teaching of Chinese language (Ministry of Education of the Peoples Republic of China, 2020a), yet English language instruction remains largely examination-driven in practice with a focus on grammar, vocabulary and test-taking skills (Sun, 2017). As a result, systematic development of IC is frequently neglected in teaching. Conventional instruction has perpetuated instrumental approaches in which immediate academic success is more important than cross-cultural communication.

Recent studies on the integration of intercultural learning into Chinese English of a foreign language (EFL) teaching have primarily focused on teachers' instructional practices, curriculum reform and textbook design (Gao, 2019; Sun, 2017; Wu, 2024). However, there has been little attention given to how learners themselves perceive intercultural learning. Examining their perspectives has the potential not only to illuminate current issues in classroom teaching and learning but also to generate solutions for more effective implementation at the secondary school level.

Literature Review

Key Concepts and Scope

Many of the frameworks that shape the current debates on IC were developed in Europe and North America. Within this tradition, Byram's (1997) model emerged from the Council of Europe work and elaborates van Ek's (1986) notion of “communicative ability” rather than introducing an entirely new competence architecture (van Ek & Trim, 1990). Deardorff's (2006) process model further influenced international education. Recently, many scholars have argued for epistemological plurality in how

intercultural notions are understood, moving beyond Western-centric assumptions toward plural and situated understandings (Chong & Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2015; R'boul, 2022). A recent Delphi study synthesised cross-regional perspectives to redefine IC and its assessment (Dai & Feng, 2024). Building on this conversation, this present study operationalises intercultural learning through a Chinese conception of IA. It provides valid, policy-aligned and classroom-observable indicators.

In the Chinese secondary context, as defined in the General High School English Curriculum Standards (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020b) and further articulated in Wu (2024), IA functions as a developmentally appropriate and pedagogically actionable stage of intercultural learning. The focus is on foundational cultural knowledge, openness and respectful attitudes, and observable classroom behaviours. All can be explicitly taught, scaffolded and assessed (Gao, 2019). Consistent with Western theorists (e.g. Baker, 2012), IA extends beyond factual knowledge to encompass critical reflection on one's assumptions, recognition of both surface and deep cultural patterns, and the cultivation of empathy toward diversity. These dimensions lay the cognitive and affective groundwork for subsequent intercultural learning as the learners' language and cognitive capacities expand.

Accordingly, we can translate IA into classroom practice in secondary EFL settings via observable, assessable indicators aligned with knowledge, attitudes and behaviours (Gao, 2019; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020a; Wu, 2024).

The Components of IA

This study operationalises IA in line with the National English Curriculum Standards that relate to Chinese secondary EFL education (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020a). IA is framed around three mutually reinforcing dimensions: knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Teachers can design tasks, observe classroom evidence and assess progress at the lesson level. Knowledge refers to a culturally informed understanding of the practices, products and underlying perspectives developed through contextualised reading, discussion and comparison across cultures. Attitudes concern learners' openness, respect, curiosity and positive regard for their own cultural heritage alongside a willingness to reconsider assumptions. Behaviours capture culturally sensitive participation in classroom interaction, such as perspective-taking, respectful turn-taking, and clarification or comparison activities during group work and discussion (Gao, 2019; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020a; Wu, 2024).

To make IA observable and teachable in ordinary lessons, we examined these dimensions through three analytical aspects that guided task design and analysis. Self-awareness encourages reflection on one's cultural assumptions and communicative preferences during journal writing or post-task debriefs. Other-awareness involves recognising both surface and deep cultural features in texts and media without stereotyping. It is often conducted through guided comparison prompts. Interactional conduct concerns the discourse choices learners make, such as framing, hedging and mediating differences when collaborating on tasks. These choices offer concrete behavioural indicators for classroom assessment.

Following Byram (1997) and developmental accounts of intercultural learning (Deardorff, 2006), we selected intercultural communicative competence (ICC) elements such as knowledge of self. Our focus on IA reflects a methodological choice rather than theoretical exclusion. Many external outcomes typically associated with ICC, such as appropriateness and effectiveness in authentic intercultural encounters, depend on opportunities and proficiencies that vary across schools. IA therefore provides a policy-aligned and classroom-observable focus that fits the secondary EFL context while locating the learners on a developmental pathway toward ICC (Gao, 2019; Wu, 2024). Table 1 presents the IA framework used in this study, aligning the NECS dimensions with classroom-observable indicators and the corresponding data sources.

Table 1 Operationalising Intercultural Awareness (IA) for Chinese Secondary English Classes (NECS-Aligned)

IA dimension (NECS)	Analytical aspect	Classroom indicators (examples)	Data source and sample item
Knowledge	Self-/other-awareness	Contextualised understanding of practices, products and perspectives; comparison across cultures	Reading task worksheet "Identify one practice and the value behind it; compare with your own context."
Attitudes	Self-/other-awareness	Openness, respect, curiosity; willingness to reconsider assumptions; positive regard for one's cultural heritage	Reflection journal "Describe how your view changed after today's discussion."
Behaviours	Interactional conduct	Perspective-taking; respectful turn-taking; clarification and comparison activities; mediation language	Observation checklist "Student asks a clarification question before disagreeing; uses 'In X culture... how is ... perceived?'"

The three NECS-aligned dimensions and the three analytical aspects give teachers a practical blueprint, namely building contextualised cultural understanding, cultivating open and reflective stances, and shaping interactional behaviour that shows respect and perspective-taking. This specification anchors the instruments and analyses used in this present study and keeps the empirical focus tightly aligned with curriculum expectations.

IA in Chinese Secondary EFL: Empirical Landscape and Gaps

This section synthesises recent past studies of how intercultural aims are enacted in Chinese secondary EFL classes and where gaps persist rather than merely rehearsing general theory. Past studies consistently report two classroom orientations. The first is a "culture as facts" approach, where culture is treated as lists of customs and knowledge points. The second is a "culture as reflection or awareness" approach. It invites dialogic interpretation and comparison (Gao, 2006). The latter aligns more closely with IA but is underused in exam-oriented settings with limited time and uneven teacher preparation (Sun, 2017). Although the new curriculum promotes inquiry-based and humanistic pedagogy, daily instruction remains strongly driven by language accuracy and test results (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020a; Sun, 2017).

Textbook use reflects similar tensions. Materials often privilege Anglo-American norms and present cultural content in decontextualised ways. They may narrow exposure to diversity and risk shallow or stereotyped understandings (Baker, 2012; Fan et al., 2024; Xie et al., 2021). Teachers also report difficulty in operationalising abstract curriculum goals at lesson level when assessing attitudes or behaviours linked to openness and respect (Gao, 2006; Nazari, 2007). While practices such as dramatization, project work and thematic talks exist, they are frequently confined to demonstration lessons or occasional events. Moreover, they are seldom woven into routine teaching (Sun, 2017). This can lead learners to view intercultural activities as decoupled from academic performance.

Framing IA for this study follows the view that effective intercultural learning goes beyond transmitting factual knowledge. It develops interpretive understanding and the capacity to respond constructively to cultural multiplicity (Ichikawa & Kim, 2025; Qin, 2024). Accordingly, we treat IA as a developmental

construct integrating knowledge, attitudes and behaviours (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020a). We paid attention to how these dimensions are or are not made visible at the lesson level. Therefore, this present study foregrounds the learners' perspectives on IA in ordinary classes and addresses three questions:

- (1) What is the current state of IA among Chinese secondary school learners in the EFL classroom?
- (2) How is IA currently being cultivated in classroom teaching practices?
- (3) What challenges do learners face in developing IA?

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a sequential explanatory research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to investigate how IA is cultivated in Chinese secondary school EFL classrooms. The study was conducted in two phases. The first quantitative phase used a structured questionnaire to capture the learners' self-assessments of intercultural knowledge, attitudes and classroom behaviours. Descriptive statistics were used to identify the current state of IA among these learners. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each subscale all exceeded 0.6, indicating acceptable reliability (Hair et al., 2019). The full questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.

The qualitative phase comprised semistructured interviews with three learners to understand their experiences of intercultural tasks in class and how these transferred to out-of-class behaviour. We restricted interviews to learners for three reasons. First, the research questions target learner-level outcomes of IA (what students know, value and do), so the learner serves as the primary unit of analysis. Second, to maximise ecological validity, we privileged learners' accounts of the "received practice" across lessons and teachers to offer a closer view of classroom realities and reduce the social-desirability effects typical of teachers' self-reports. Third, to maintain a coherent scope, we bracketed teacher-related implementation issues and evaluative judgements which require a different sampling frame and reserved them for subsequent work. Teachers remain central to achieving IA. However, this study focuses on what might reach and shape learners.

In order to capture insights into learning as an ongoing phenomenon, the survey and interviews invited learners to reflect on their ongoing experiences across the term, including exposure to cultural content in textbooks, classroom discussions, project work and any IA-related tasks. These accounts were used to infer how IA was integrated into weekly lessons and the broader curriculum even if not systematically foregrounded by all teachers. In this way, this study does not claim to track a controlled intervention, but instead documents how learners perceive cultivation of IA as part of their regular EFL learning trajectory.

By combining quantitative data and qualitative narratives, this study applied methodological triangulation to enhance validity and enrich our interpretation (Abdalla et al., 2018; Natow, 2020). The integration of the survey findings and the interviews' insights provides a comprehensive understanding of how intercultural awareness is fostered or constrained in Chinese secondary school EFL classrooms.

Instructional Context and Embedding IA

Contextual information was drawn from the official secondary school English syllabus, the prescribed textbooks and the interviewees' reports of how their classes were taught. The focal classes followed the national curriculum and integrated IA across three recurring strands: cognitive (knowledge), attitudinal (disposition) and behavioural (performance) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020a).

Over one academic semester of 16 weeks, IA-related work took place at three levels. The first it was the textbooks' cultural units and teacher-curated supplements (short authentic texts, visual prompts) that foreground cultural schemata. The next was dialogic tasks and role-plays situated in daily intercultural scenarios (greeting rituals, refusals, invitations) that require perspective-taking. The last, it was a mini-project cycle per textbook module, culminating in a criterion-referenced performance task (introducing a local festival to a nonlocal audience). This integration reflects the recommended practices in IA-oriented EFL pedagogy. It emphasises linking cultural knowledge, attitudinal openness and communicative behaviour (Gao, 2019; Sun, 2017). Teachers framed the objectives in IA terms, modelled target discourse activities and pragmatics, provided guided practice (think–pair–share activities, jigsaws, debates) and closed lessons with reflective prompts or journals to support knowledge transfer. Formative assessment relied on microrubrics aligned with the three IA dimensions and low-stakes feedback with an emphasis on growth and participation rather than summative grading. A summary map of how IA was embedded in the lessons appears in Table 2.

Furthermore, teacher-guided cultural reflection activities were incorporated into the weekly lessons to deepen the learners' intercultural understanding. These included reflective writing prompts (How would someone from another country view this situation?), post-roleplay debriefs and comparative group discussions on cultural norms in daily practices. Such activities helped learners internalise the cultural dimensions of classroom content while reinforcing affective engagement. Teachers also used tailored microrubrics to track their cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural development over time to facilitate continuity flowing from instruction and classroom observation to formal assessment.

Table 2 *Mapping IA's Dimensions to Classroom Integration Over One Semester*

IA dimension (NECS-aligned)	Curricular integration points	Typical learning activities (examples)	Frequency and duration (semester)	Teacher guidance and evidence of learning
Cognitive (knowledge)	Textbook-based cultural units; teacher-curated authentic snippets; culture notes in reading lessons	Comparative reading of first language–second language culture bites; idiom/pragmatic glossing with cultural connotations; mini-lectures with visual aids	Weekly short segments (≈15–20 min); 3–4 extended tasks across ~16 weeks	Advance organisers; graphic organisers; quick concept checks; exit tickets referencing culture points
Attitudinal (disposition)	Pre-/post-discussion blocks; reflection corner; values clarification tied to unit themes	Think–pair–share about problems; stance-taking statements; guided reflection journals with prompts (e.g., empathy, stereotype checks)	Twice weekly dialogues; 3–4 journal entries per semester	Sentence stems for respectful disagreement; reflection prompts; brief feedback on openness or nuance in journals
Behavioural (performance)	Role-plays and simulations; project-based tasks; posters or micropresentations	Role-plays on invitations, refusals and requests; simulated intercultural meetings; project: “explain a local practice to a non-local audience”	Twice weekly role-plays; one mini-project per module with a demonstration	Modelling of discourse moves; rehearsal with peer feedback; microrubrics on appropriateness, turn-taking, repair

Participants

Participants were selected from Z Secondary School. It is a prominent secondary school in Zhuhai City, Guangdong Province, China. For the quantitative phase, 200 learners were randomly selected from a population of 1002 to complete the questionnaire. This sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve a 95% confidence level with a $\pm 5\%$ margin of error. Most participants were 11th-grade learners, as intercultural topics are formally introduced in the English curriculum at this level.

All 1002 participants received five 40-minute English lessons per week, in accordance with the NECS. They were approximately gender-balanced (male: 48%; female: 52%), although no specific gender stratification was applied. According to internal school benchmarks and standardised English assessments aligned with the NECS, most learners demonstrated an intermediate level of English proficiency in the Chinese secondary school system. Their average score on the school-based English test was approximately 112 out of 150. This suggests that they were generally able to understand classroom instructions, follow familiar cultural themes and engage in routine communication tasks. However, they had not taken any internationally standardised proficiency exams. Their English level cannot be directly compared with global frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Although the learners were able to recall basic cultural facts (festivals, etiquette), they had not yet acquired intercultural sensitivity in a meaningful or observable way. Specifically, they showed limited ability to interpret cultural meaning from alternative perspectives, with few signs of empathy, perspective-taking or suspension of ethnocentrism.

To support learners' IA development, English teachers at the participating school provided systematic scaffolding throughout the semester. This included pre-task guidance (vocabulary previews, cultural background briefings), in-task modelling of appropriate discourse strategies (politeness markers in refusals) and post-task reflections. They also employed ongoing formative feedback techniques, such as brief oral comments, peer review and small-group debriefs to address the learners' affective and behavioural progress in IC tasks. These approaches aimed to create a supportive environment in which the learners could gradually internalise intercultural sensitivity and communicative appropriateness.

As shown in Table 3, three learners were selected through purposive sampling to participate in semi-structured interviews during the qualitative phase. The limited number of interviewees reflects the explanatory purpose of the qualitative strand. The aim was not to reach saturation across a large cohort but to generate illustrative and nuanced accounts that help interpret the survey's trends. To enhance diversity in the perspectives, the three learners were chosen to represent different grades and proficiency levels. This ensured variation in experience rather than statistical representativeness. This design is consistent with a sequential explanatory research design, where the qualitative phase serves to enrich and contextualise the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Informed consent was obtained from both the learners and their legal guardians in accordance with ethical guidelines. The following inclusion criteria were used to recruit participants:

- They had participated in the preceding quantitative survey phase.
- They demonstrated the ability to articulate their experiences and reflections clearly.
- They indicated a willingness to participate in the interview voluntarily.

Each interview lasted 30–40 minutes. This allowed for an in-depth exploration of the learners' experiences with intercultural content in classroom instruction, school-based activities and demonstration lessons.

Table 3 *Participants' Basic Demographic*

Category	Details
Number of participants	200 learners (questionnaire), 3 learners (interviews)
Grade level	Grades 1–3
Gender distribution	Male: 98; female: 102
English proficiency level	Intermediate
Sampling method	Random sampling for questionnaire; purposive sampling for interviews

Research Instruments

Two main research instruments were used in this study, namely a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol. The questionnaire was adapted from Liu (2020) regarding the strategies of creating cultural awareness in Chinese secondary school EFL. It was modified to view the issue according to the general research aspects of this study. Preliminary items from Liu's (2020) instrument were reviewed by two experienced secondary school EFL teachers and three associate professors in education research. In accordance with what they reported, a number of improvements were made. Initially, items that were inappropriate for the situation of school life or redundant were removed. Next, the language and expressions were adapted to be closer to the language habits of secondary school Chinese learners. Finally, new items were added to consider the learner's specific attitudes in manifestation of their intercultural sensitiveness in the classroom.

The questionnaire used in this study included 30 items. They were distributed in a logical way among three dimensions, as proposed for the NECS model: the cognitive dimension (8 items) to cover cognitive knowledge of cultural knowledge, the emotional dimension (10 items) to gather emotional attitudes towards intercultural issues, and the behavioural dimension (12 items) related to behavioural expressions of IA in classroom situations. Participants were requested to score each statement on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). In order to measure the internal consistency reliability of the scale, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed for each subdimension via SPSS 26.0. The cognitive, emotional and behavioural items had coefficients of 0.672, 0.830 and 0.931 respectively. A Cronbach's alpha of >0.6 is acceptable for exploratory studies, while >0.8 represents strong reliability (Farrokhi et al., 2023). These findings indicated that the modified questionnaire had appropriate internal consistency and were appropriate for this current study. Table 4 shows the corrected item total correlation (CITC) and Cronbach's alpha if an item was deleted for all items across the three dimensions.

Table 4 *CITC and Cronbach's Alpha Values of the Questionnaire Items*

Category	Code	Item content	CITC	Cronbach's alpha if the item was deleted
Cognition	A1	I believe that understanding the culture and history of English-speaking countries helps improve English proficiency.	0.382	0.672
	A2	I am satisfied with the cultural content presented in the textbook.	0.603	

(Continued)

Category	Code	Item content	CITC	Cronbach's alpha if the item was deleted
Attitude	A3	I have learned about the experiences, achievements and contributions of major writers, artists, scientists and politicians from English-speaking countries.	0.529	0.83
	A4	I feel it is difficult to learn cultural knowledge about foreign countries.	0.115	
	A5	Through learning English, I have gained a deeper understanding of Chinese culture.	0.471	
	A6	I find it hard to understand foreign customs and behavioural norms in intercultural learning.	0.291	
	A7	I can introduce Chinese culture in English.	0.355	
	A8	After completing a unit, our teacher organises cultural-themed group activities.		
	B1	I am interested in learning about the culture of English-speaking countries.	0.596	
	B2	I can quickly understand English idioms by integrating their cultural connotations.	0.607	
	B3	I respect foreign cultures.	0.491	
	B4	I believe cultivating cultural awareness is important in learning English.	0.6	
Behaviour	B5	Differences in cultural habits affect my communication with foreign friends.	0.2	0.931
	B6	I am aware of the differences in expression, language styles and behaviours between China and foreign countries.	0.467	
	B7	Learning English helps enhance my confidence in Chinese culture.	0.463	
	B8	I think one purpose of learning English is to promote excellent Chinese culture.	0.486	
	B9	I believe suggestions on cultural awareness are important for my future personal growth.	0.534	
	B10	I am satisfied with the cultural content presented in the textbook	0.603	
	C1	During role-playing activities, I can adjust my behaviour depending on the cultural background of the character.	0.594	
	C2	I can adapt to local customs when travelling abroad.	0.534	
	C3	The teacher uses English to explain foreign cultural content.	0.549	
	C4	The teacher guides us to summarise cultural points rather than directly telling us.	0.712	

(Continued)

Category	Code	Item content	CITC	Cronbach's alpha if the item was deleted
	C5	The teacher integrates real-life situations into English class to create learning scenarios.	0.661	
	C6	During teaching English text, the teacher gives us time to think independently about cultural knowledge.	0.773	
	C7	The teacher often uses role-plays to assess our cultural learning.	0.799	
	C8	After role-play activities, we receive immediate feedback from the teacher.	0.797	
	C9	In English class, the teacher uses group discussions to prompt us to reflect on our cultural views.	0.776	
	C10	Group discussions help me critically assess others' cultural perspectives.	0.765	
	C11	The teacher uses mind maps or charts to help us understand cultural content.	0.769	
	C12	After each unit, the teacher organises culturally themed group activities.	0.681	

A semistructured interview protocol was developed to elicit Chinese secondary school learners' perceptions and experiences related to IA across three dimensions of classroom instruction: regular lessons, school-based curriculum and demonstration of open lessons. The design of the protocol followed Nicmanis and Spurrier's (2025) recommendations for constructing qualitative interviews to emphasise open-ended, thematically guided and research-aligned questions. The questions were designed to encourage the learners to reflect on their engagement with English-speaking cultures through different modes of instruction, the perceived value of cultural content and the challenges encountered when developing IA. Sample items included: "What do you think is the main goal of learning English?", "Do you think cultural content in the textbook makes language learning more interesting? Why?" and "Which type of lesson—regular, school-based, or open class—do you feel best supports your cultural understanding?" The questions also invited learners to share their views on classroom activities, self-directed cultural exploration and their reflections on culture-related experiences. A pilot version of the protocol was tested with two non-participant learners to refine language clarity and thematic focus. The full interview guide is provided in Appendix B.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected in two consecutive stages. In the first phase, the quantitative questionnaire was administered to 200 learners from Z High School. To ensure consistent delivery, standardised instructions were shared in advance with English teachers. They were not part of the research team. The actual administration of the questionnaires was overseen by the external researchers. Thus minimised the risk of coercion or undue influence. Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous, and the participants were explicitly informed that their decision to participate or not would have no impact on their academic standing or relationship with the teachers. Informed consent was obtained from the school principal, the participating learners and their guardians.

The second phase involved semistructured interviews with three selected learners. These interviews were conducted in a quiet reading room within the school to ensure a comfortable and confidential setting. The participants were informed that they could withdraw at any point without explanation or consequence. Each interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes and was digitally recorded with prior written consent.

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the learner questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics, primarily frequency counts and percentage distributions. Each item on the Likert-scale questionnaire was processed using SPSS 26.0 to calculate means and standard deviations for individual items and for each thematic dimension (intercultural knowledge, attitudes and behaviour). These descriptive results were used to identify patterns and areas of strength or weakness in the learners' IA. A full summary of the item-level responses is provided in the Findings section (see Table 5 and Figures 1–4).

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data gathered from the semistructured interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis approach. First, all interview transcripts were read and re-read to ensure familiarity. Second, open coding was used to generate initial codes based on meaningful units of the responses. Third, the codes were reviewed, refined and grouped into axial codes representing shared thematic patterns. Fourth, these were organised under overarching themes that aligned with the research questions. NVivo 14 software was used to assist in data management and coding consistency. Illustrative excerpts and the corresponding codes are discussed in the Findings section, organised into three major themes (Tables 6–7 and Figure 5).

Findings

Findings from the Questionnaire

The findings are presented in the form of stacked bar charts for the three dimensions. An intuitive image of the learners' growth trends and their IA from the cognitive level to the attitudinal and behavioural level (Figure 1) was used to synthesise the central topic.

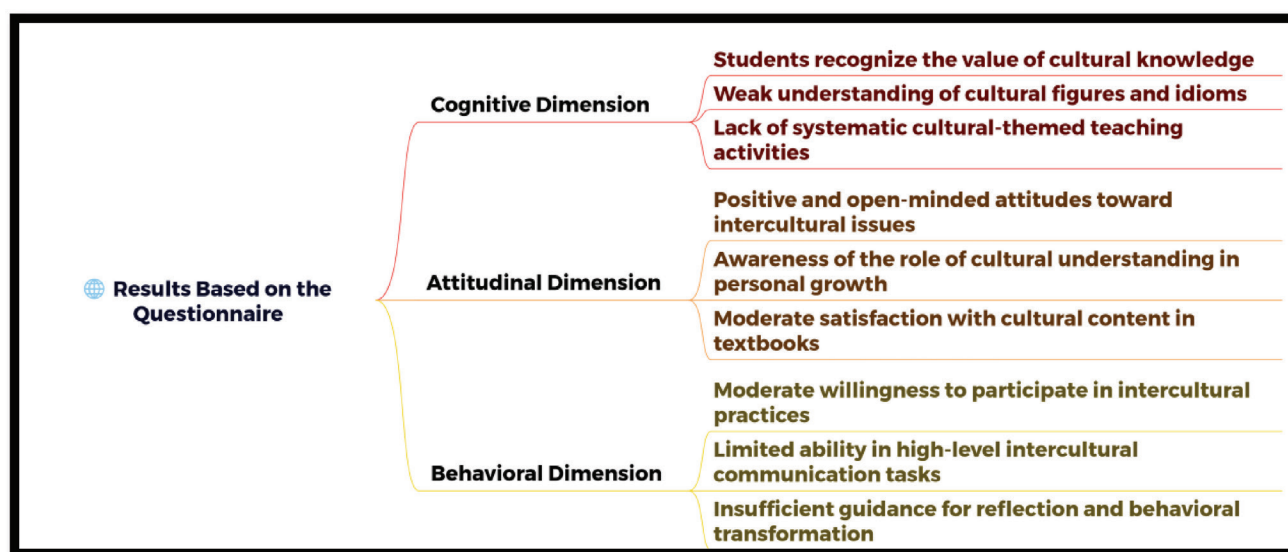


Figure 1 Results from the Questionnaire

Table 5 includes all the items of the questionnaire for transparency and rigorous data reporting. All categories have been labelled with a code (A1, B1, C1) to make them easier to discuss. Stacked bar charts visually displaying the distribution of the learners' responses for each dimension.

Table 5 *Questionnaire Items and Coding Overview*

Category	Code	Item content	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Cognition	A1	Understanding English culture helps improve English proficiency	4.50%	6%	22%	38%	29.50%
	A2	Learning about important figures in English-speaking countries	10.50%	27%	37.50%	12%	13%
	A3	Understanding English idioms and their cultural connotations	10%	23%	32.50%	22.50%	12%
	A4	Able to adapt to foreign customs when abroad	9%	15.50%	36.50%	25%	14%
	A5	Learning more about Chinese culture through learning English	2%	6%	23%	38%	31%
	A6	Difficulty understanding foreign customs	7.50%	23.50%	38.50%	15%	15.50%
	A7	Able to introduce Chinese culture in English	9%	14%	32.50%	29.50%	15%
	A8	After completing a unit, the teacher organises culturally themed activities	24%	25.50%	30.50%	11%	9%
Attitude	B1	Willing to learn about foreign cultures and customs	2%	3%	16%	47%	32%
	B2	Respecting the values and behaviours of foreigners	1.50%	3.50%	20%	43%	32%
	B3	Willing to use English to discuss cultural differences	1.50%	4.50%	24%	40%	30%
	B4	Understanding the rationale behind different cultural expressions	1.50%	5%	20%	42.50%	31%
	B5	Enjoying participating in cultural exchange activities	3%	5.50%	25.50%	39%	27%
	B6	Respecting and appreciating foreign cultures	1%	4%	20%	42%	33%
	B7	Learning more about Chinese culture through learning English	2%	6%	23%	38%	31%
	B8	Learning English enhances confidence in Chinese culture	3%	3%	20.50%	39%	34.50%
	B9	Believing that suggestions on cultural awareness are important for personal growth	1%	2%	13%	44%	40%
	B10	Satisfaction with the cultural content presented in the textbook	6%	7%	34%	35%	18%

(Continued)

Category	Code	Item content	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Behaviour	C1	Willing to participate in role-plays related to foreign cultures	5%	9%	30%	34%	22%
	C2	Able to adjust communication depending on the cultural context	7%	13%	37%	28%	15%
	C3	Able to complete cultural project tasks	8%	11%	34%	32%	15%
	C4	Able to collaborate with peers from different cultural backgrounds	4.50%	7.50%	28%	37%	23%
	C5	Proactively learning about other cultures during activities	5%	8%	32%	35%	20%
	C6	Actively discussing cultural topics in English class	7%	10%	30%	34%	19%
	C7	Demonstrating cultural sensitivity during discussions	6%	9%	35%	32%	18%
	C8	Willing to introduce Chinese culture to foreigners	4%	6%	25%	40%	25%
	C9	Able to engage in intercultural communication with confidence	7.50%	12%	36%	28%	16.50%
	C10	Communicating effectively in simulated international exchanges	8%	11%	34%	32%	15%
	C11	Willing to participate in intercultural competitions or events	5%	7%	28%	38%	22%
	C12	Able to reflect and improve intercultural behaviour after activities	6%	9%	32%	35%	18%

Cognitive Dimension

These findings suggest that although the learners recognise the value of cultural knowledge, their actual cultural literacy remains constrained (mean = 2.73). This may be a result of minimal exposure in the classroom and possibly insufficient scaffolding by the teachers. But there was a bright side, as over two-thirds (67.5%) of the participants indicated a moderate or higher level of agreement with the item of that learning EFL can enhance their language ability (A1). There was an approximately similar proportion of those who associated learning EFL with knowing more about Chinese culture (A5: 69%). Additionally, the number of learners who claimed that they could transfer English-speaking culture into Chinese culture or vice versa was 44.5% (A7). This suggests that their level of culture was also average. On the other hand, noticeable deficiencies were observed in the remaining items. A2 and A3 show that around three-quarters of the learners did not know about important figures in English-speaking countries or about the culture-based meaning of English idiomatic expressions. More than one-third disagreed with these statements.

This is also indicative of an overall aversion to intercultural understanding, where the habits of foreigners are regarded as hard to understand (A6: 30.5% versus 31% who disagreed). Of further interest is A8, which indicates an institutional deficit, as 49.5% disagree that their teachers organised the unit's activities around a culture theme. This suggests a lack of systematic attention to the integration of

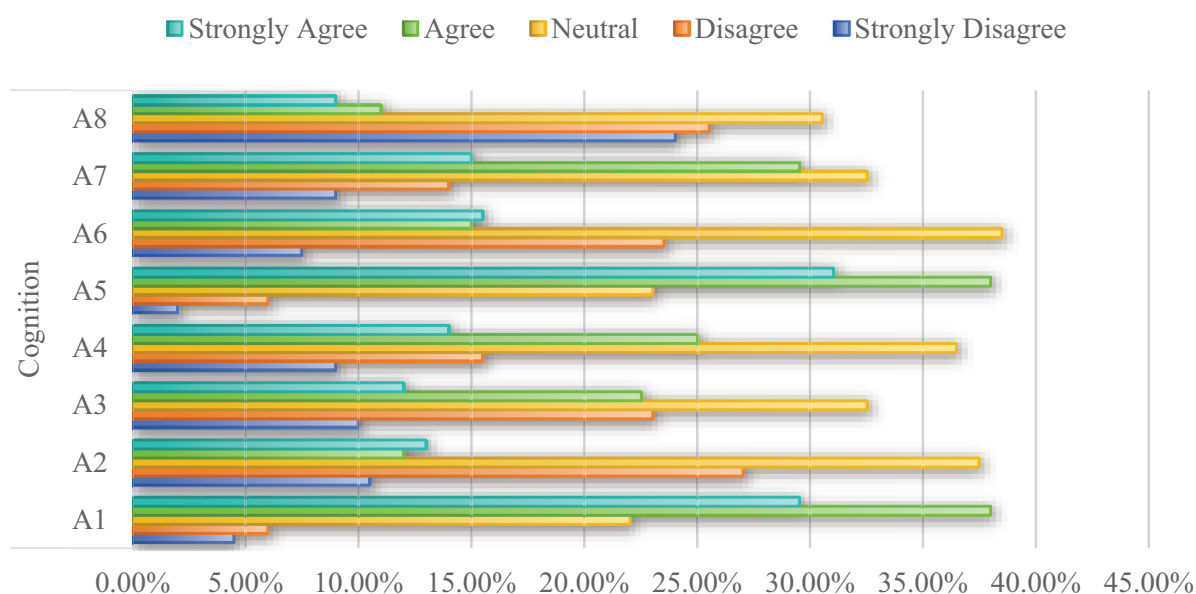


Figure 2 *Distribution of Responses in the Cognition Dimension*

intercultural elements into EFL. This result suggests that despite their understanding of the significance of cultural knowledge, the learners' cultural literacy skills are not yet well developed, possibly because of inadequate presentation of this necessary lifestyle tool and a lack of sufficient support from education professionals.

Attitudinal Dimension

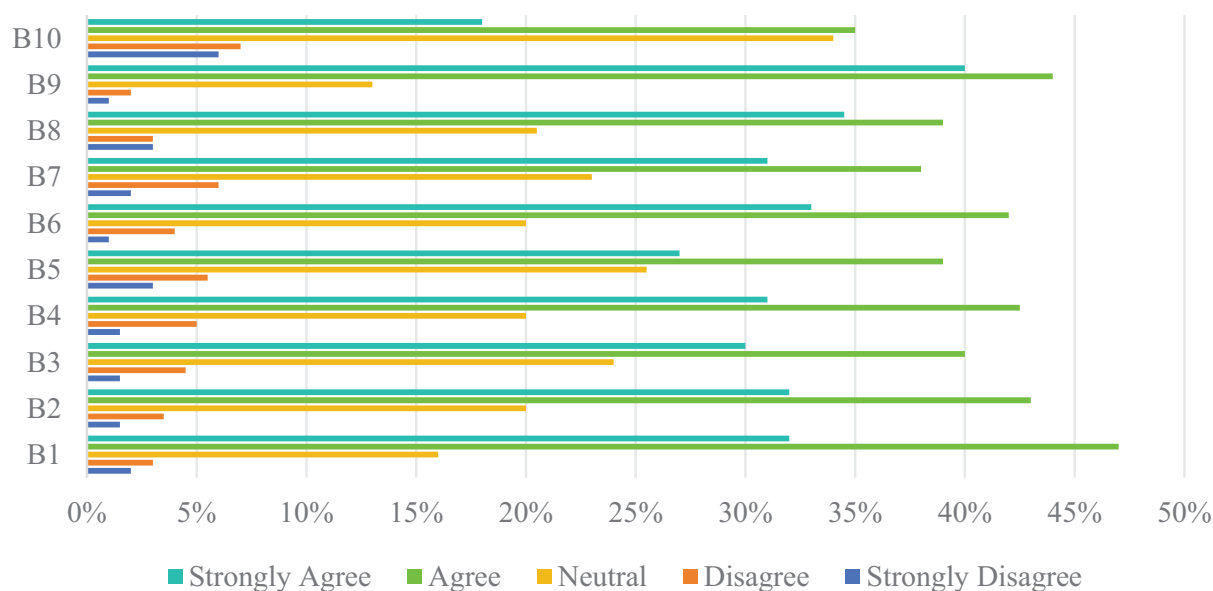


Figure 3 *Distribution of Responses in the Attitude Dimension*

In contrast to their cognition, learners expressed very high favourable intercultural attitudes (Figure 3). Such positive attitudes (mean = 4.12) reflect an open and inclusive mindset among the students. They are likely to be influenced by broader globalisation trends and their exposure to digital content. Furthermore, more than 70% of the participants were always willing to learn about other cultures (B1) and showed respect for others' values (B2) or an appreciation for other cultures (B6). It is interesting to note that 84% of learners believed that advice on cultural sensitivity could help their personal growth

(B9). Moreover, 73.5% agreed that learning EFL could help build confidence in Chinese culture (B8). This warm reception shows an interesting cosmopolitan mentality and a spirit of openness among the learners. It could be driven by growing globalisation tendencies and adapting to digital content. However, Item B10 revealed that only 53% were satisfied about the cultural content in textbooks. This shows a discrepancy between what learners expected and the current teaching materials. This discontent reflects a limitation of the curriculum. The existing textbook resources may not have the required depth or breadth of intercultural content. Thus, they cannot cater to learners' attitudinal readiness to engage.

Behavioural Dimension

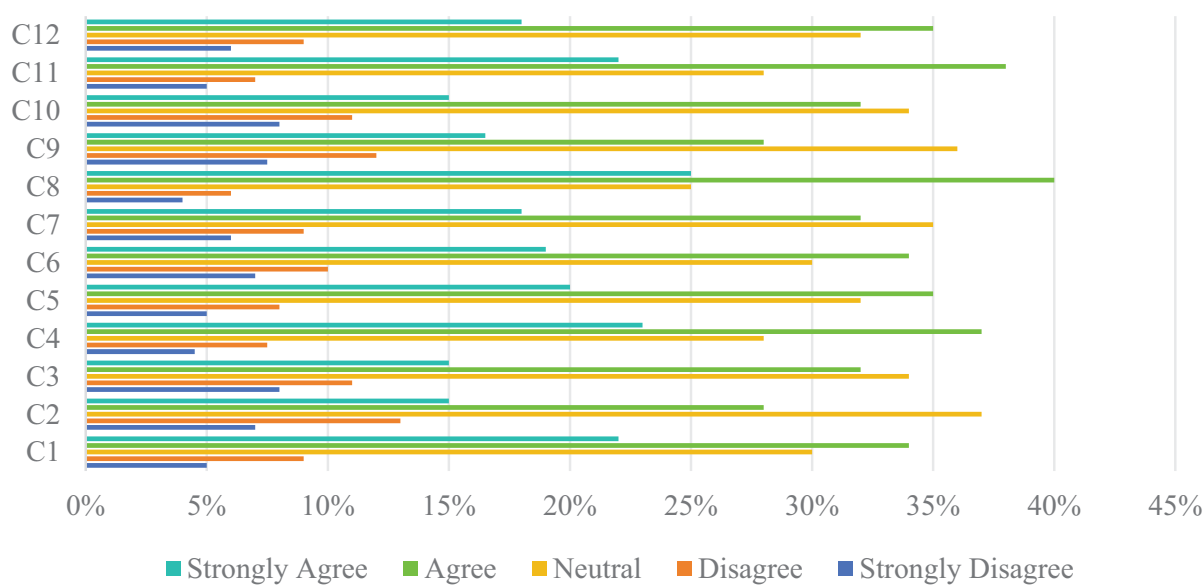


Figure 4 *Distribution of Responses in the Behaviour Dimension*

The learners' performance is moderate and rather inconsistent in terms of intercultural behaviours (Figure 4) and behavioural indicators (mean = 2.45). Therefore, this reflects a pressing need to translate affective disposition into classroom-based experiential learning. For instance, 56% of the learners showed an openness towards role-plays on foreign cultures (C1) and around 63% would be willing to participate in intercultural activities (C11) or introduce Chinese culture to a foreigner (C8). Meanwhile, higher-order skills subject to behaviours resulted lower cultural reflection (C12), collaboration across cultures (C4) and context-sensitive communication (C2). The least agreement was shown for intercultural confidence (C9), with 44.5% agreeing that they could communicate like this with confidence. This is likely to be the consequence of a lack of practical experience and the lack of oral training in EFL. Moreover, the participants' capacity to fulfil the requirements of particular tasks related to cultural projects (C3: 47%) or to engage in appropriate communication in simulated intercultural situations (C10: 47%) was also moderate. This attitude-behaviour gap points to a practical problem. Although the learners want to act and are psychologically ready, they do not have the opportunities and instructional support they need to translate intent into practical action. Behavioural cues therefore signal the urgency of transforming affective disposition into classroom-based experiences.

The overall results suggest that Chinese high school learners possess positive intercultural attitudes. But there is a diversity gap and a lack of much observable application of intercultural knowledge in action among them. This disconnection indicates an imbalance between the learners' intercultural openness and the school's educational and curricular routines. Intercultural themes do not seem to be

deeply integrated into the main teaching and learning programme. Moreover, the learners' preparation for intercultural communication is aspirational rather than operational. To address this gap, English instruction should extend beyond rote-learning facts and should promote experiential and task-based cultural learning. Including cultural immersion, group dialogue and reflection experiences within the curriculum could support the transformation of learners' positive attitudes by leading to skilled intercultural behaviour. In addition, the textbooks and educational materials need to be modernised to reflect the increasing interest and awareness among learners of global cultures.

Findings from the Semistructured Interviews

Table 6 below demonstrates the open codes related to the qualitative findings and their descriptions.

Table 6 *Selected Open Codes and their Descriptions*

Code (open/axial)	Description
C1: Culture as peripheral content	Cultural topics are treated as supplementary, often introduced briefly without further elaboration.
C2: Fragmented knowledge presentation	Cultural elements appear in disconnected fragments, lacking thematic continuity.
C3: Exam-driven prioritisation	Classroom emphasis remains on language skills that are directly tested, sidelining cultural learning.
C4: Suppressed cultural curiosity	Learners' interest in cultural topics is diminished because of exam-related pressures.
C5: Formalised cultural activities	Cultural events or projects are conducted in ritualistic ways without depth or learner ownership.
C6: Demonstration-focused performance	Cultural teaching is emphasised during open lessons or public displays rather than in daily practice.
C7: Lack of intercultural simulation	Classrooms rarely provide opportunities for authentic or simulated intercultural interactions or dialogue.
C8: Minimal reflective engagement	Students are seldom guided to reflect critically on cultural norms or differences.

Through organising and refining the initial codes, this study subsequently combined them into three main themes. The themes represent aspects of the learners' experiences of intercultural learning and are substantiated by a number of related codes. This inductive approach led to the identification of patterns and provided a way to develop specific pedagogical implications, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. *Themes and Associated Codes*

Theme	Representative codes (open/axial)	IA dimension
1. Fragmented cultural instruction	"Just breeze through the culture parts"; "no explanation why it matters"; "culture is thrown in"; "not tested so skipped"	Cognitive
2. Conflict between intercultural learning and exam pressure	"Culture does nothing for our scores"; "no time for culture"; "exam is the real thing"; "culture is a flashy front"	Attitudinal
3. Superficial cultural experience in the classroom	"Download a nice PPT and it's done"; "just acting not speaking"; "no real cultural conversation"; "just doing the assignment"	Behavioural

Theme 1: Fragmented Cultural Instruction Undermines Coherent IA Learning

Although IA is conceptually positioned as an integral component of language education (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020a), learners' reflections revealed a disjointed and fragmented experience of cultural content. Rather than forming a cohesive, developmental sequence across lessons, cultural instruction appeared to be sporadic and marginalised. As P1 described it:

"When your teacher talks about culture, basically you're going to breeze through... when you see Thanksgiving or Christmas in the text... they'll say a little about it and then go straight to the exercises. That's the simple unexplainable fact."

Similarly, P2 remarked:

"Cultural content is something they throw in when you do the unit introduction or you read the passage."

The neglect of deeper cultural elaboration was partly attributed to exam-oriented time constraints. Even when specific cultural topics emerged, the engagement was superficial. For instance, P3 recounted:

"Let's take our British afternoon tea, for example. The teacher informed us that it's a tradition, but didn't say why it mattered or who it had to do with social position."

These comments indicate that cultural elements, while present, were not systematically embedded in instruction to promote cognitive IA (knowledge of values, beliefs and social norms). The result is a diminished opportunity for learners to recognise culture as a meaningful lens for interpretation, rather than an accessory to reading comprehension.

Theme 2: Conflict Between Intercultural Learning and High-Stakes Exam Pressures

Despite expressing interest in foreign cultures, learners felt a consistent tension between their curiosity and the demands of exam-focused instruction. Cultural content, though appreciated, was perceived as secondary and unrelated to academic success. Therefore, it was marginalised in daily learning priorities. P1 admitted the following:

"I like studying about foreign cultures, but I can't take the cram test! There's no time left."

P2 elaborated:

"We memorise English words, practice English reading, and do grammar exercises in English class. I enjoy cultural content, but it does nothing for our scores."

The prioritisation of exam readiness over cultural exploration appeared to be systemic. As P3 observed:

"If the college entrance examination directly examined cultural knowledge, we would take it seriously. At present, it's only mentioned here and there so that we can make sense of the text."

Furthermore, P1 critiqued performative displays of culture during official events:

"Cultural spectacle in public when the lessons are underway... that is a flashy front but it is only a front. The day-to-day is still 100 percent test prep."

These narratives underscore the disconnect between attitudinal IA, which demands openness and sustained reflection, and the systemic pressures of a high-stakes testing environment. The curriculum's intention to foster intercultural sensitivity is undercut by school structures that reward language accuracy and memorisation over empathy and reflection.

Theme 3: Superficial and Performative Cultural Activities Limit the Development of Behavioural IA

Another gap emerged in the behavioural dimension of IA. It involves the ability to act appropriately and flexibly in intercultural contexts. The learners viewed classroom activities as formalised, scripted and lacking in authenticity or personal relevance. P1 reflected on Cultural Week:

"We produced a lot of materials, but they were mainly downloaded from the internet. So long as the PPT was pretty, nobody cared if there was anything underneath."

P2 added:

"The role-plays are just scripted conversations in locations like airports or restaurants. It's just memorisation; it feels like acting, not speaking."

P3 further noted:

"There's virtually no real conversation about class cultural difference, really. A lot of things are just about doing the assignment."

These insights suggest that the learning context often failed to simulate authentic intercultural encounters. Activities were seen as mechanical tasks fulfilling an assignment's requirements rather than as opportunities to apply cultural knowledge in meaningful communication. As a result, learners were not given sufficient space to rehearse or internalise the communicative behaviours associated with intercultural competence.

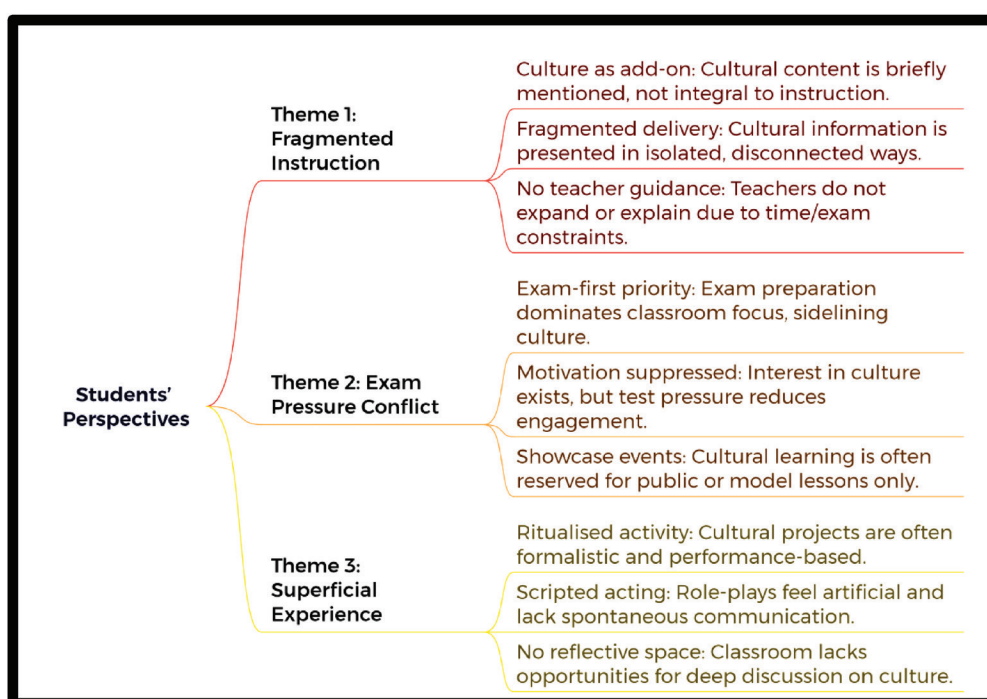


Figure 5. Thematic Map of Students' Perspectives According to an Analysis of the Interview data

The interviews reveal a significant divergence between the intended outcomes of IA education and its practical realisation in the classroom. The fragmented content delivery, exam-driven priorities and superficial task designs, together impeded the cultivation of IA across all three dimensions: cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural. These findings call for a rethinking of how intercultural objectives are implemented in curriculum design and classroom pedagogy. Figure 5 summarises the three key themes emerging from the interview data. It highlights the learners' perceptions of fragmented cultural teaching, exam-driven constraints and superficial classroom experiences.

Discussion

This study triangulated questionnaire responses with the interview data to describe Chinese secondary learners' IA and to illuminate how IA is cultivated and constrained in EFL lessons.

Current State of IA among Learners

This study offers a clearer view of IA among Chinese secondary EFL learners. It reveals a three-layer profile that combines strong attitudes, uneven knowledge and hesitant behaviour. Learners display notably positive dispositions toward cultural diversity, with an attitudinal mean of 4.12. This is higher than the figures reported in earlier Chinese surveys and is consistent with Gao (2019) prediction that social media exposure is nurturing a more cosmopolitan outlook. From the findings, 84% link cultural sensitivity to personal growth. It is a form of affective readiness that has seldom been quantified previously. However, their cognitive scores remain modest at 2.73. Three-quarters cannot identify major figures from English-speaking countries. Learners struggle with idioms and receive only sporadic culturally themed activities. Nevertheless, 69% say English also deepens their understanding of Chinese culture. This reveals a dual knowledge gap that extends beyond the usual West-focused lens.

Behavioural indicators are the weakest (mean = 2.45). Although 63% would join intercultural events, fewer than half feel confident in simulated exchanges. This numerically confirms the attitude–action gap highlighted qualitatively by Gao (2019). The interviews explain why this gap endures. The learners described culture as peripheral “bites,” noted exam-driven shortcuts and recounted showcase lessons that turn IA into decoration rather than daily practice. It clarifies how fragmented content, high-stakes testing and performative tasks intersect to block behavioural growth.

Contrary to long-standing fears of cultural erosion, 73.5% believe that studying English strengthens pride in Chinese culture. It offers large-scale evidence from Mainland China of a hybrid cultural identity previously observed mainly in Hong Kong and Singapore (Heng & Lim, 2021). Only 53% express satisfaction with the textbook's coverage. This signals that a new generation demands deeper, dialogic cultural content and no longer tolerates token references. By providing a robust, three-dimensional baseline, documenting the hybrid identity shift, linking quantitative gaps to qualitative mechanisms and broadening critique from an Anglo-centric bias to the twin deficits of limited self-representation and intercultural action, this study advances global IA study. The current state of IA in Chinese secondary EFL classrooms thus appears as attitudinal readiness unmet by instructional reality. The learners are willing and curious, yet classroom structures channel that curiosity into memorisation rather than authentic exchange. This could be a misalignment that future research and policy must address to transform such openness into competent intercultural practice.

Current Cultivation of IA in Classroom Practice

The classroom picture that emerges from our data is that cultivation of IA is caught between policy aspirations and entrenched teaching routines. On the positive side, nearly two-thirds of the learners

report that teachers occasionally link language points to cultural topics (A1, A5). This confirms recent ministry guidelines that ask instructors to “embed culture in each unit” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2020a). This partial infusion aligns with Gao’s (2019) claim that the new curriculum has nudged teachers toward more culture-oriented tasks. However, the same learners also describe these moments as brief and disconnected: half say that cultural activities at the end of the unit are missing (A8). They label culture as “peripheral content” delivered in five-minute digressions. This echoes Baker’s (2012) critique of “culture as decoration.” But our larger sample shows that the problem is no longer fringe. It is the norm in mainstream classrooms.

Exam pressure remains the decisive brake on sustained IA work. Teachers still devote most class time to grammar and translation drills because these items dominate in high-stakes tests. This repeats a pattern Sun (2017) called “instructional backwash.” However, this present study extends the discussion by mapping exactly how this backwash fragments IA across the three NECS dimensions. Cognitive items about idioms and historical figures scored lowest, which suggests teachers skip content that requires extended explanation. Behavioural tasks (role-plays, projects and simulations) are planned but seldom enacted. Learners recount scripted “airport dialogues” that feel like acting but not genuine negotiation. These findings reinforce Piipponen et al.’s (2024) observation that classroom-based cultural work often stops at the level of polished performances. We show that such performances are not simply the teachers’ preference but a survival strategy. Public “culture shows” satisfy the administrators without sacrificing precious test-preparation minutes.

Unexpectedly, the learners’ strong attitudinal base has begun to challenge this status quo, as 84% percent believe that cultural awareness promotes personal growth and 73.5% say that learning English strengthens pride in Chinese culture. This attitudinal surge creates a new tension. Learners want richer intercultural content. Unlike earlier critiques that blamed an Anglo-centric bias, the learners fault textbooks for shallow coverage of both foreign and Chinese themes. It indicates that globalisation has raised their expectations for dialogic and comparative material.

We demonstrate that cultivation of IA falters not merely because the teachers lack resources, since they often merely download attractive cultural slides. because of curricular pacing guides, test blueprints and inspection rituals, they channel culture into ornamental slots. This layered explanation advances Hymes’s (1972) call for sociolinguistic authenticity and Byram’s (1997) triadic model by generating insights about classroom realities. Moreover, the evidence of the learners’ hybrid cultural pride revises the long-standing erosion narrative. It suggests that when scaffolded, English can serve as a medium for rearticulating national identity rather than diluting it. The current classroom practice is best described as piecemeal cultivation that is enough to tick the curricular box but is insufficient to transform knowledge into action. Recognising this systemic bottleneck is a necessary next step for researchers and practitioners seeking to turn China’s attitudinal readiness into sustained intercultural learning.

Challenges Learners Face in Developing IA

Chinese secondary school learners face a dense cluster of challenges when trying to convert their positive intercultural attitudes into robust IA. Our data help disentangle where the blockages occur. First, knowledge gaps remain stubborn. Three-quarters of the learners could not identify key figures from English-speaking countries or unpack idiomatic connotations. The results echo Gao et al.’s (2024) warning about the “thin factual layer” in textbooks’ cultural notes. However, they extend it by showing that even self-representation suffers.

Fewer than half felt able to introduce Chinese culture in English. This twin deficit suggests that learners lack both outward and inward cultural lenses. This complicates Deardorff’s (2006) developmental model that assumes growing self-knowledge alongside other-knowledge.

Next, the cultural experiences offered in class are often performative rather than dialogic. Role-plays feature scripted airport scenes. Cultural Week projects prioritise colourful slides over reflective commentary. Xie et al. (2021) critiqued such superficiality, but our interview data trace it to inspection rituals. Teachers stage visually impressive events to meet administrative metrics while safeguarding test preparation time. This finding reframes “surface culture” as a systemic artefact rather than merely the teachers’ habit.

Third, digital exposure widens the aspiration gap. Learners described encountering nuanced global content online and sharpening their appetite for substantive discussion that classrooms rarely satisfy. Gao (2019) predicted digital cosmopolitanism. However, its unintended cost such as heightened disappointment with school materials has not been documented until now.

Lastly, the attitudinal–behavioural mismatch persists. Although 70% are willing to join intercultural activities, only 45% feel confident in simulated exchanges. Previous work (Yılmaz et al., 2024) noted this gap, but our survey pinpoints the weakest behavioural strands (reflection, mediation and context-sensitive talk), thus signalling where instructional scaffolds are most needed.

Collectively, these challenges illustrate a paradox. Policy and technology have primed students for intercultural growth, yet assessment regimes, instructional pacing and tokenistic activities corral that potential into fragmented moments. By mapping how each obstacle intersects with curriculum structures and stakeholder expectations, this present study advances the study of IA from descriptive inventories of difficulties to an integrated explanation of why they endure. It sets a clearer research agenda focused on redesigning assessment tasks, deepening self–other cultural content and turning performative events into dialogic rehearsal spaces that cultivate the behaviours of IC.

Conclusion

This mixed-method study paints a nuanced picture of IA in Chinese secondary EFL classrooms. The survey results show that learners hold strong attitudes towards cultural diversity (mean = 4.12) but display modest cultural knowledge (mean = 2.73) and even lower behavioural engagement (mean = 2.45). The qualitative interviews reveal three systemic barriers: exam-oriented grammar and translation, fragmented “culture bites” that lack communicative value, and performative showcase lessons detached from daily practice. Intriguingly, many learners believe IA work can also deepen pride in Chinese culture, yet they rarely receive opportunities to act on this conviction.

This study has several implications. For teachers, lesson planning should blend dialogic materials, reflective journals and performance-based tasks that model and assess perspective-taking, clarification and mediation activities. For school leaders and policymakers, aligning assessment policies with IA’s objectives by embedding low-stakes intercultural criteria into routine testing would signal that cultural learning matters as much as grammatical accuracy. Theoretically, the findings affirm IA as a developmentally appropriate precursor to full intercultural communicative competence. It emphasises that attitudes alone do not guarantee action. Practically, this study offers a three-strand classroom blueprint (knowledge, attitudes, behaviours) that other exam-oriented systems can adapt. Methodologically, the sequential explanatory research design demonstrates the value of pairing descriptive statistics with emic interview insights to expose attitude–behaviour gaps.

Several limitations temper these claims. The interview data came from only three volunteers because parental consent restricted wider participation. Classroom observations were not included and the focus on a single high-performing school limits generalisability.

Future research should therefore track the growth of IA longitudinally across diverse schools. In addition, researchers could test intervention packages that embed intercultural tasks into regular assessments. Moreover, incorporating teachers' perspectives and video-based classroom evidence is suggested. Eventually, researchers could develop finer-grained behavioural rubrics to capture incremental progress. Such work will clarify how best to convert learners' intercultural openness into confident and context-sensitive action. Hence, these could better prepare learners not merely to pass exams but to engage ethically and effectively in an interconnected world.

Declaration: A generative artificial intelligence tool was used to polish the language for better clarity and grammar.

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Appendix A

Intercultural Awareness (IA) Questionnaire (Secondary School EFL Students)

Cognition

- A1. I believe that understanding the culture and history of English-speaking countries helps improve English proficiency.
- A2. I am satisfied with the cultural content presented in the textbook.
- A3. I have learned about the experiences, achievements, and contributions of major writers, artists, scientists and politicians from English-speaking countries.
- A4. I feel it is difficult to learn cultural knowledge about foreign countries.
- A5. Through learning English, I have gained a deeper understanding of Chinese culture.
- A6. I find it hard to understand foreign customs and behavioural norms in intercultural learning.
- A7. I can introduce Chinese culture in English.
- A8. After completing a unit, our teacher organises culturally themed group activities.

Attitudes

- B1. I am interested in learning about the culture of English-speaking countries.
- B2. I can quickly understand English idioms by integrating their cultural connotations.
- B3. I respect foreign cultures.
- B4. I believe cultivating cultural awareness is important in learning English.
- B5. Differences in cultural habits affect my communication with foreign friends.
- B6. I am aware of differences in expression, language styles, and behaviours between China and other countries.
- B7. Learning English helps enhance my confidence in Chinese culture.
- B8. I think one purpose of learning English is to promote excellent Chinese culture.
- B9. I believe suggestions on cultural awareness are important for my future personal growth.
- B10. I am satisfied with the cultural content presented in the textbook.

Behaviours

- C1. During role-playing activities, I can adjust my behaviour depending on the cultural background of the character.
- C2. I can adapt to local customs when travelling abroad.
- C3. The teacher uses English to explain foreign cultural content.
- C4. The teacher guides us to summarise cultural points rather than directly telling us.
- C5. The teacher integrates real-life situations into English class to create learning scenarios.
- C6. During teaching English text, the teacher gives us time to think independently about cultural knowledge.
- C7. The teacher often uses role-plays to assess our cultural learning.
- C8. After role-play activities, we receive immediate feedback from the teacher.
- C9. In English class, the teacher uses group discussions to prompt us to reflect on our cultural views.
- C10. Group discussions help me critically assess others' cultural perspectives.
- C11. The teacher uses mind maps or charts to help us understand cultural content.
- C12. After each unit, the teacher organises culturally themed group activities.

Appendix B

Semistructured Interview Questions for Students

1. Do you enjoy reading magazines or watching films related to English-speaking countries? Why or why not?
2. What do you think is the main purpose of learning English?
3. How do you understand the concept of intercultural awareness?
4. Do you think it is necessary to include cultural instruction in high school English classes? Please explain why.
5. In your opinion, does cultural teaching by your English teacher help improve your language learning? Why or why not?
6. Does the cultural knowledge in textbooks increase your interest in learning the English language? Why?
7. After completing each unit, do you search for additional cultural information related to the unit topic? Why or why not?
8. What do you think is the main difference between school-based courses and regular English lessons?
9. Do you think discussions on intercultural content in school-based courses help you better understand cross-cultural issues?
10. What is the greatest challenge you have faced when participating in school-based course activities (e.g., discussions, debates, presentations)?
11. Do you think school-based courses help you build intercultural awareness?
12. What are the most valuable gains you have obtained from participating in school-based courses in terms of intercultural awareness?
13. Are public demonstration lessons taught entirely in English?
14. What are the differences, in your view, between public demonstration lessons and regular classes?
15. Do you think public demonstration lessons help you develop intercultural awareness?
16. Among public demonstration lessons, school-based courses and regular lessons, which type of class do you prefer? Why?
17. In your opinion, which type of instruction is more effective in developing cultural or intercultural awareness?