

## Original Research Article

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# Practical Pathways and Challenges of Integrating Cultural Awareness into Senior High School English Teaching

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**Abstract:** In the 21st century, marked by the in-depth development of globalization, intercultural communicative competence has become an essential component of core competencies. As a bridge connecting Chinese and foreign cultures, senior high school English has shifted its instructional goals from a sole focus on language skill training to a comprehensive educational model that integrates language competence with cultural awareness. This paper aims to systematically explore the theoretical foundations, practical significance, diversified implementation pathways, and underlying challenges of incorporating cultural awareness into senior high school English teaching. It first clarifies the connotation of “cultural awareness” and its positioning in the *English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision)*. It then proposes specific and operational practical pathways from four dimensions: curriculum content, teaching methods, teacher competence, and assessment systems. Finally, the paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the challenges encountered in current practice, including limitations of teaching materials, deficiencies in teachers’ professional competence, exam-oriented pressure, and students’ cognitive biases, and accordingly puts forward optimization suggestions. The study indicates that only by constructing a student-centered, multi-dimensionally coordinated, and dynamically developing culture-immersive teaching ecosystem can the educational value of the English discipline be truly realized, thereby cultivating a new generation equipped with Chinese cultural identity, a global vision, and intercultural communicative competence.

**Keywords:** Cultural awareness; senior high school English teaching; intercultural communication; practical pathways; teaching challenges

## Introduction

At present, the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind has gained wide acceptance, and the Belt and Road Initiative continues to advance steadily, making the demand

for high-level intercultural communicative talents increasingly urgent in China. As the cornerstone of talent cultivation, education has undergone reforms oriented toward the development of core competencies. The *English Curriculum Standards for General*



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*Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision)* identifies “cultural awareness” as one of the four core competencies of the English subject, emphasizing its role in shaping intercultural cognition, attitudes, and behavioral orientations in a globalized context. This marks a transformation of senior high school English teaching from an instrumental approach centered on language knowledge and skills to a comprehensive, human-centered educational model integrating language, thinking, culture, and character development. However, in actual teaching practice, the cultivation of cultural awareness is often marginalized or reduced to a superficial formality. Classroom instruction frequently remains confined to vocabulary, grammar, and exam-oriented techniques, with insufficient exploration of the cultural connotations embedded in texts. As a result, although students may demonstrate linguistic proficiency, they often encounter difficulties in authentic intercultural contexts and may even generate cultural misunderstandings or conflicts. Therefore, how to effectively integrate the abstract concept of cultural awareness into daily English teaching, explore feasible pathways, and overcome practical challenges has become a critical issue that urgently needs to be addressed in senior high school English education. This paper provides a systematic discussion of these issues.

## **1. The Connotation of Cultural Awareness and Its Value Positioning in Senior High School English Teaching**

### **1.1 The Multidimensional Connotation of Cultural Awareness**

Cultural awareness does not refer to a superficial curiosity about exotic customs; rather, it is a complex psychological construct encompassing three interrelated dimensions: cognition, affect, and behavior.

(1) The cognitive dimension refers to students’ knowledge and understanding of Chinese and foreign cultural phenomena, values, modes of thinking, social norms, and historical traditions. This includes both explicit material culture (such as festivals, cuisine, and architecture) and implicit spiritual culture (such as individualism versus collectivism, and differences between high-context and low-context cultures).

(2) The affective dimension concerns the cultural attitudes formed on the basis of cognition. It includes confidence in and identification with China’s outstanding

traditional culture, respect for and openness toward the diversity of world cultures, as well as the ability to remain rational and avoid prejudice in the face of cultural encounters and collisions.

(3) The behavioral dimension refers to the ability to internalize the first two dimensions into practical action. Specifically, it involves communicating appropriately and effectively in authentic intercultural contexts, resolving cultural conflicts, and demonstrating sound cultural literacy.

### **1.2 Value Positioning under the New Curriculum Standards**

The new curriculum standards elevate cultural awareness to the level of core competencies and endow it with three key values.

First, an intrinsic driving force for language learning: language is the carrier of culture, and language learning detached from culture is hollow. Understanding cultural contexts enables students to grasp more accurately the deeper meanings of vocabulary, the situational use of syntactic structures, and the logical organization of discourse, thereby enhancing both the efficiency and depth of language learning.

Second, a core vehicle for moral education: through the comparison of Chinese and foreign cultures—particularly by guiding students to gain an in-depth understanding of China’s outstanding traditional culture, revolutionary culture, and advanced socialist culture—students’ national pride and cultural confidence can be effectively strengthened, thus fulfilling the contemporary mission of “telling China’s stories well”<sup>[1]</sup>.

Third, a foundation for global competence: in the era of globalization, the ability to understand and respect cultural differences is a prerequisite for effective international cooperation and competition. The cultivation of cultural awareness directly serves national development strategies that call for internationally minded talents.

## **2. Diversified Practical Pathways for Integrating Cultural Awareness into Senior High School English Teaching**

To transform cultural awareness from an educational concept into teaching reality, it is essential to construct a multidimensional practical system that covers the entire teaching process.

## 2.1 Deep Exploration of Textbooks to Build a Framework for Cultural Interpretation

Textbooks serve as the primary basis for instruction. Teachers should not regard them merely as collections of linguistic materials, but rather as rich repositories of cultural resources.

(1) Going beyond surface-level information: when teaching a text about Western festivals, teachers should not only focus on relevant vocabulary, but also guide students to explore the historical origins, religious beliefs, and social functions underlying these festivals. Comparisons can then be made with traditional Chinese festivals (such as the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival), encouraging students to reflect on cultural differences in concepts such as family, reunion, and gratitude.

(2) Establishing thematic cultural units: by breaking away from the original unit boundaries of textbooks, teachers can organize materials around universal cultural themes such as “identity,” “environmental protection,” and “technological ethics.” Relevant texts from different units or even different textbook editions can be integrated into thematic inquiries, enabling students to deepen their understanding of cultural commonalities and particularities through comparison.

(3) Introducing a critical perspective: students should be encouraged to think critically about potential cultural biases or stereotypes in textbooks. For example, they can analyze whether certain texts excessively idealize or disparage a particular culture, thereby cultivating independent cultural judgment.

## 2.2 Innovating Teaching Methods to Create Immersive Cultural Experiences

Traditional “transmission-oriented” teaching approaches often fail to arouse students’ cultural resonance. Teachers should therefore adopt more interactive and experiential methods.

(1) Project-Based Learning (PBL): culture-themed projects can be designed, such as “Introducing My Hometown to Foreign Friends.” In such projects, students are required not only to write English introductions, but also to produce multimedia presentations incorporating local cultural features (such as intangible cultural heritage, dialects, and cuisine), and to present them in simulated authentic communicative settings. This approach closely integrates language output with cultural expression.

(2) Role-play and situational simulation: authentic intercultural communicative scenarios—such as business negotiations, asking for directions at an airport, or ordering food in a restaurant—can be simulated in class. By assuming roles from different cultural backgrounds, students can personally experience communication barriers caused by cultural differences and learn how to adjust their language and behavior to accommodate others’ cultural norms<sup>[2]</sup>.

(3) Empowerment through digital technology: VR and AR technologies can be used to enable virtual visits to institutions such as the British Museum and the Louvre; social media platforms can facilitate pen-pal exchanges with overseas peers; and online international cultural exchange activities can be organized. These technological tools help overcome temporal and spatial constraints and provide students with immersive cultural experiences.

## 2.3 Strengthening Teacher Leadership to Enhance Cultural Education Awareness

Teachers are the key agents in integrating cultural awareness into classroom practice. Their own cultural literacy and pedagogical beliefs directly determine the effectiveness of implementation.

(1) Continuous enhancement of teachers’ cultural literacy: teachers should take the initiative to study theories of intercultural communication, engage in extensive reading of Chinese and foreign literary classics, and stay informed about international affairs, thereby constantly enriching their cultural knowledge base. Schools should provide systematic and regular professional development programs to support this process.

(2) Acting as cultural “interpreters” rather than “judges”: in classroom instruction, teachers should guide students to view cultural differences objectively and on an equal footing, avoiding value-laden labels such as “advanced/backward” or “good/bad.” The emphasis should be placed on explaining why such differences exist, rather than evaluating their superiority or inferiority.

(3) Building bridges for dialogue between Chinese and foreign cultures: teachers should be adept at identifying points of connection between cultures. For instance, when introducing Western individual heroism, teachers can guide students to reflect on the “chivalric spirit” in traditional Chinese culture or

contemporary forms of “collective heroism,” thereby fostering understanding and mutual learning through comparison.

#### **2.4 Reforming the Assessment System with a Focus on the Development of Cultural Literacy**

The principle of “what is tested determines what is taught” functions as a powerful guiding force in educational practice. Therefore, it is essential to establish assessment mechanisms aligned with the objectives of cultural awareness cultivation.

(1) Formative assessment: students’ demonstrations of cultural sensitivity, inclusive attitudes, and intercultural communication strategies during classroom discussions, group collaboration, and project presentations should be incorporated into assessment criteria. Methods such as observation records and learning portfolios can be employed for this purpose.

(2) Performance-based assessment: open-ended, task-based assessment items can be designed. For example, students may be presented with a scenario involving cultural conflict (such as a Chinese student being misunderstood in a Western classroom due to silence) and asked to analyze the causes and propose solutions in English. Such tasks effectively assess students’ ability to apply cultural knowledge in practice.

(3) Integration into summative assessment: in midterm and final examinations, as well as in large-scale assessments such as the college entrance examination, the proportion of items assessing cultural understanding and critical thinking should be appropriately increased. This can be achieved by selecting reading comprehension texts rich in cultural information and designing writing tasks centered on intercultural communication topics, thereby exerting a positive backwash effect on teaching.

### **3. Major Challenges and Corresponding Strategies in the Practice of Integrating Cultural Awareness**

Although the practical pathways are clearly defined, numerous real-world difficulties still arise in the process of implementation.

#### **3.1 Limitations of Textbook Content and Supplementary Strategies**

While mainstream textbooks currently in use have strengthened their cultural components, several limitations remain. First, the proportion of Chinese

cultural content is relatively low and is often confined to traditional symbols (such as kung fu and pandas), with insufficient representation of contemporary China’s development achievements and spiritual outlook. Second, some cultural content is presented in a static and fragmented manner, lacking depth and systematic organization. To address these issues, teachers should act as “secondary developers” of textbooks. They can actively supplement instruction with high-quality extracurricular resources, such as BBC documentaries on *Chinese New Year*, English-language reports from CGTN (China Global Television Network), and translated works of contemporary Chinese literature. At the same time, students should be encouraged to independently collect and share cultural materials related to course themes, jointly constructing a dynamic and vibrant classroom-based cultural resource repository.

#### **3.2 Deficiencies in Teachers’ Intercultural Teaching Competence**

Many frontline teachers have themselves been shaped by exam-oriented educational contexts, resulting in limited intercultural knowledge reserves and a lack of systematic training in intercultural pedagogy. Consequently, they often feel inadequately prepared when addressing complex cultural topics. In response, educational administrative departments and schools should increase investment in targeted and practice-oriented teacher training programs. Training content should encompass intercultural communication theory, the translation and international dissemination of Chinese culture, and pedagogical approaches to critical thinking<sup>[3]</sup>. In addition, school-based or regional professional learning communities should be established. Through collaborative lesson planning, lesson case discussions, and expert mentoring, such communities can promote mutual support and professional growth among teachers.

#### **3.3 Constraints Imposed by Exam-Oriented Educational Pressure**

Under the dominance of the college entrance examination, both teachers and students tend to allocate limited time and energy to vocabulary memorization, grammar drills, and test-taking techniques that yield quick results, often viewing cultural instruction as “time-consuming and inefficient,” or even as an educational

“luxury.” To address this constraint, on the one hand, research and classroom practice should demonstrate that profound cultural understanding can significantly enhance the depth of reading comprehension and the sophistication of ideas in writing, ultimately contributing to improved examination performance. On the other hand, reforms in assessment and evaluation should be promoted to make the assessment of cultural literacy “measurable and assessable,” thereby reshaping the utilitarian mindset of teachers and students. In addition, teachers can skillfully integrate cultural elements into routine language instruction in a subtle and natural manner, achieving a “moistening effect without sound,” rather than treating cultural teaching as a separate or additional component.

### 3.4 Biases in Students’ Cultural Cognition and Instructional Guidance

Influenced by online information, some students exhibit extreme tendencies toward Western culture, either engaging in blind admiration or complete rejection. At the same time, they may display indifference toward their own culture, taking it for granted and lacking both interest and confidence in gaining a deeper understanding of it. To respond to this challenge, instruction should emphasize balance. While showcasing the diversity and appeal of world cultures, teachers should also guide students to recognize the unique value and contemporary vitality of Chinese culture. Activities such as English speech contests themed around “Telling China’s Stories in English” and English poster exhibitions titled “Traditional Festivals in My Eyes” can be organized to stimulate students’ cultural subjectivity and willingness to express themselves<sup>[4]</sup>. The key lies in cultivating students’ capacity for cultural reflection, enabling them to appreciate others while firmly grounding their own cultural identity.

### Conclusion

Integrating cultural awareness into senior high school English teaching is a strategic endeavor closely related to the fundamental task of fostering moral character and cultivating students, as well as to the nation’s future competitiveness. It is by no means a simple addition of cultural knowledge, but rather a profound transformation of educational philosophy and teaching practice. Successful

integration requires systematic thinking: taking the new curriculum standards as the guiding framework, textbooks as the foundational support, innovative teaching methods as the driving force, a high-quality teaching workforce as the guarantee, and a scientific assessment system as the orientation. In the face of multiple challenges—including limitations of teaching materials, inadequacies in teacher preparation, exam-oriented pressure, and students’ cognitive biases—educators should neither abandon cultural education due to practical difficulties nor expect instant results. Instead, they should uphold firm cultural confidence alongside an open international perspective, and engage in meticulous, sustained efforts in everyday teaching through continuous exploration, reflection, and optimization. Only in this way can a new ecology of senior high school English teaching be truly established, one in which language and culture reinforce each other, and local identity and global vision coexist in harmony. Such an approach will cultivate a new generation of young people who possess both deep patriotic commitment and a broad global outlook—who can not only communicate fluently in English, but also engage in dialogue with cultural wisdom—thereby contributing Chinese insight and strength to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

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