



# What Are the Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching Culture in English Classrooms in Selected High Schools in Shanghai, China?

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**Abstract.** Language teaching is closely related to culture teaching. Therefore, as ESL teachers, it is inevitable to teach culture while teaching language in the classroom. So what are the opportunities and challenges for Chinese teachers and students? This paper selects two high schools in Shanghai for comparison, public high schools and international high schools, and conducts a questionnaire survey on their students and teachers to get the results.

**Keywords:** Teaching culture · challenge · opportunity · high school

## 1 Introduction

Research on teaching culture has shown that language and culture are closely related and are best acquired together. Brown [8] describes the interrelatedness of language and culture, stating that “One cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. The acquisition of a second language, except for specialized, instrumental acquisition..., is also the acquisition of a second culture (p. 189–190).” In our research, the culture we refer to is the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and arts. Culture is what makes countries unique [9]. Each country has different cultural activities and cultural rituals. Culture is more than just material goods; that is, things the culture uses and produces. Culture is also the beliefs and values of the people in that culture, and it also includes the way people think about and understand the world and their own lives. In the process of culture teaching, students will learn a new way of expressing ideas and get a new way of thinking, behaving, and living. Based on these findings, it is clear that language and culture learning are inextricably linked, but what role does culture play in language teaching, and how is it being taught in China?

English Language education in China has gone through several stages of development in the past 30 years. The early language learning method was centered on grammar acquisition, but this has moved to communicative competence development. Although the Official Document in 2001 laid down “cultural awareness” as one of the language teaching objectives, there seems to be a gap between the new curriculum and what’s going on in the classrooms.

This study investigates the positive significance of teaching culture in Chinese English classrooms and the disadvantages that exist in this process from both teachers' and students' perspectives. The study will explore how teaching culture works in China's ESL classrooms by studying the attitudes and reactions of teachers and students in two different types of high schools in Shanghai, namely public high schools and international high schools. To understand the transmission of culture in teaching language, find the opportunities and challenges of teaching culture in language classrooms that can provide a reference for Chinese language teachers in ESL teaching and improve students' language learning efficiency.

Our study will observe the responses to cultural teaching of students and also observe their teachers in two different schools. At the same time, we will also send out questionnaires and conduct interviews to draw a comprehensive conclusion.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 What is Culture**

The British writer Raymond Williams [16] once suggested, "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." (p. 89) Looking back at the studies of culture, we can confidently assert that culture is a highly complex concept with manifold meanings. We cannot and do not advocate a singular definition of culture since any one description will be too restrictive. Thus, the better approach is to view the concept of culture from different perspectives (Martin & Nakayama, 2018). Martin and Nakayama [10] categorized three perspectives on defining culture: social science, interpretive, and critical definitions. Social science scholars influenced by research in psychology view culture as a set of learned, group-related perspectives that are acquired mainly in childhood and through a lifetime. In comparison, interpretive researchers tend to focus more on contextual patterns of communication behavior that are made up of verbal and nonverbal activities in a broad setting. They also point out that culture is also about emotions. When we are in a familiar cultural environment, we feel a sense of comfort. The critical view is in line with the recent work in anthropology that they are against categorizing people and cultural patterns as fixed and unchanging sets. Culture is a dynamic and fluid concept, and many social boundaries can be blurred. Viewing culture as a contested site helps us understand the complexities of our own and others' cultures [11].

The wealth of research suggests that attempts to understand culture in particular positions and definitions are in vain [4]. Language learners easily access cultures outside their everyday life experiences in a society shaped significantly by modernization and globalization. While culture is not taught in a vacuum or learned in isolation [7], understanding the meanings of culture can scaffold both educators and students in the classroom to do better in multicultural, multilingual teaching and learning.

### **2.2 Teaching Culture in ESL Classrooms**

Most scholars suggest that language and culture are inextricably linked with each other. The acquisition of a second language is also the acquisition of a second culture [8]. In the

same way, Kuang [8] put that “language is the carrier of culture and culture is the content of language (p.76).” Involving cultural elements in a language classroom can motivate students to learn the target language and learn the authentic and natural language used in everyday life. At the same time, students can understand their own culture more deeply by exposing themselves to different cultures.

When we talk about English-related culture mainly, we should also look at globalization. In the globalized world people are experiencing, there is a complex, accelerating, integrating process of global connectivity that many people worldwide now need to communicate on a broader scale with a lingua franca. The predominance of the English language has made it the global language. It has been used not only among native speakers but also among nonnative speakers. At the same time, it is worth noting that “English” is also a broad and comprehensive notion that should be presented in a plural form (Englishes). There are so-called inner circle Englishes, such as American English and British English; extended circle Englishes, such as Caribbean English and Indian English; expanding circle Englishes, such as Mexican English and Japanese English. When educators introduce English-related cultures in the classroom, it is insufficient to only talk about the “inner circle” ones, especially in globalization. It might lead to what some scholars call “linguistic imperialism” [9], which means the establishment and continued reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages.

What is taking place in the ESL classrooms right now is the overemphasis of the four skills of language (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) and the downplaying of the fifth (culture). Educators should empower students to communicate both linguistically and culturally. After doing some limited research in this field, we have found that most previous research is about the exploitation of teachers and students’ opinions and views toward teaching and learning culture [12, 15], as well as their understanding of culture [13]. The specific challenges and opportunities in the ESL classroom have not gained enough attention. What’s more, an empirical study conducted in Chinese, or more specifically, Shanghai high schools is insufficient. Thus, this study, discussing the opportunities and challenges in teaching culture in different kinds of Shanghai high schools within the student body of Chinese teenager ESL learners, may contribute some new data and reflections in this particular field.

### **2.3 Opportunities of Teaching Culture to High School Students**

With the development of globalization and increasing international communication, English as a global language plays a more critical role in the development of society. Since the 1980s, China has represented one of the significant growth areas in the world for English language education and studying English has been a priority among its foreign language educational policies. Now that we understand how closely culture is related to language teaching, it is essential to provide cultural background in English instruction. It is relatively uncommon to integrate cultural teaching into language teaching in China, especially in public schools. Most teachers will give exam-oriented education to students. However, this phenomenon has gradually improved. This initiative has both opportunities and challenges for Chinese students and teachers.

Some scholars believe that in the process of teaching culture, students' intercultural competence will be improved. Liddicoat [17] proposes that "In the current situation, the whole goal of language teaching is to cultivate cross-cultural competitiveness." In his book *Striving for the Third Place: Intercultural Competence through Language Education*, he expounds on the positive aspects of improving cultural competitiveness from three parts: helping students understand other societies and cultures, cultivating students' cultural empathy, and prompting students' future work development.

Dong Yige [17] also pointed out that for Chinese students, the teaching of foreign culture is conducive to improving their intercultural communication ability and class quality. To a certain extent, it can also help spread Chinese culture and push the international promotion of Chinese.

## 2.4 Challenges of Teaching Culture to High School Students

Although culture teaching has brought many opportunities to students, some scholars have put forward some challenges related to culture teaching. On the one hand, some Chinese scholars believe that the spread of English has significantly impacted the Chinese young generation's life, culture, and language habits. This has led to the westernization of many students' lifestyles and speech habits. To some extent, the popularity of English weakens or even replaces the status of Chinese. At the same time, it also leads to the loss of the original function of Chinese, making it slowly change and marginalized.

Wu Sile [14], a professor at Guangdong University, conducted an empirical study on 403 college students from five universities in Guangzhou through questionnaires and individual interviews. The results show that when apologizing, only 24.6% of the students will speak it in Chinese, while the English "Bye Bye has entirely replaced the Chinese expression of "再见" (which means goodbye)". In 403 valid questionnaires, no subjects will use Chinese to express their meaning when they want to end the dialogue. Wu said that "Sometimes English culture does form an external and aggressive force, which will weaken and corrode our Chinese traditional culture." Furthermore, Kachru (1992) mentions that "English is a North American sub-genre that threatens other languages and homogenizes culture."

On the other hand, it is also a great challenge for teachers to weave culture into daily instruction. Chen and Yang [5] examined six different language programs at Rocky Mountain University (RMU) in the western United States. They said that "Two factors that are troubling their cultural teaching: (1) various individual understandings of culture teaching in FL classrooms. Because the definition of culture is too broad, different teachers have different understanding of the real meaning of teaching culture in foreign language classroom, and many instructors are not sure whether they have taught culture in their classes.; and (2) teaching textbook culture or reality culture." In some foreign language courses, some teachers will only introduce basic cultural knowledge about the target language country, such as the number of people living there, some important cities, few famous people, that's all about it. They are not sure whether this cultural information are enough to help students learn the language.

### 3 Research Questions

The leading research question of this study is “what are the challenges and opportunities of teaching culture in English classrooms in selected high schools in Shanghai, China?” It will be helpful to answer the following sub-questions to make sure the whole study is conducted in the correct direction.

- (1) What is teaching and learning culture like in selected ESL classrooms in Shanghai?
- (2) From students’ perspective, how do they feel about learning culture?
- (3) From instructors’ perspective, what are the highlight and setback moments of teaching culture?
- (4) Are there any similarities and differences in teaching culture in various school settings?

The researchers intend first to understand the actual teaching and learning culture situation in the selected settings and then figure out the opportunities and challenges from both the students’ and the instructors’ perspectives. Since the two groups are both crucial participants in the classroom dynamics, it is inappropriate to neglect either of them. By comparing different kinds of high schools, the researchers aim to find out the factors that lead to teaching and learning challenges and then make efforts to find out a more effective way of involving culture in the classroom.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Setting

This study will ideally be conducted in two high schools located in Pudong, Shanghai. One is a public high school; the other is an international high school. There are tremendous differences among high schools between cities or even within the same city. Thus, to minimize the confounding factors, the researchers selected schools in one particular district (Pudong District, located in the eastern part of Shanghai). The public high school setting means that the main body of the students will take the college entrance examination held by the nation to enter domestic colleges. Besides the English class, they take courses in Chinese and learn English as their second language. On the other hand, the international high school setting means the students will apply to colleges overseas. In the background of China, the “international school” basically means schools use English as the campus language and utilize American or European curriculum to guide the students. Students apply to colleges in major English-speaking countries, such as the US, the UK, or Australia. There are different kinds of international high schools in terms of the student body, while the one in this study is a school with a student body of teenagers born and raised in China.

The researchers choose convenient samples, which are the schools in which their former classmates or colleagues work.. It is easier for them to get permission from the schools, the teachers, and the students to conduct class observations or interviews.

The ESL classes in the two schools are all taught in English with a duration of 45 min. They are both aimed to enhance students’ performance in exams (national college entrance examination English subject & Toefl, Sat).

## 4.2 Participants

The student participants are grade 11 students aged 16–18, who have experienced 9-year compulsory education with a home language of Chinese and an English proficiency level of intermediate. The public high school class has a student body of 40 (23 female, 17 male), and the international school has a student body of 25 (13 female, 12 male).

The instructor's participants are 4 teachers (2 from the public school and 2 from the international school) who agreed to join the research. They all have taught in their positions for at least 3 years. The chart below shows more of their information (the names are pseudonyms).

All participants will be assigned permission for informed consent, and they will sign an informed consent and give it back to the researchers.

## 4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

This study will be conducted with both the quantitative and qualitative methods in the educational field to better understand the research questions. The researchers will collect data from both the insiders and outsiders' views using class observation, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews.

## 4.4 Class Observation

The researchers will conduct a one-week long in-class observation in each school's two English classes. They plan to observe what is actually happening in the real ESL classrooms. Each of them will go to one class in the two schools. In order to know the original conditions in these classes, they will minimize their existence by sitting in corners or sneaking into the classroom.

Researchers will take notes about how often teachers involve culture in class, how teachers teach culture; how students react to cultural topics, what the students' behaviors in the class are, and so on.

## 5 Questionnaire

After a week's observation, the researcher will give questionnaires to all the students in the four classes. The questionnaire will be anonymously assigned in paper printing. There will be a 1–4 rating scale (so the participants cannot just choose the middle option, they must show preferences) aiming to find students' self-reflection of understanding different cultures, students' interests in learning culture; their preferences of learning culture; their attitudes toward the teaching they have right now... For more information, the questionnaire also contains open-ended questions to let students freely express their ideas about expectations, dissatisfactions, and challenges of culture learning.

The researchers will summarize the rating-scale results into charts to demonstrate any similarities and differences among students' answers and identify the often-mentioned issues in the open-ended questions.

## 6 Semi-structured Interview with Students and Teachers

The researchers will invite 8 (4 from public school, 4 from international school) randomly selected students (selected by student number) to participate in the interview part. The 4 teachers will also be interviewed after the observation and questionnaire research section. They will answer questions asked by the two researchers individually in Chinese. Any form of recording will be informed before the interview. The researchers will create a safe and comfortable space to encourage them to say whatever they want.

It is a semi-structured interview since the researchers will only prepare a few questions to guide themselves and will constantly revise and adjust interview questions based on the questionnaire results and the interviewee's words.

After all the data collection, the researchers will summarize any emerging trends and answer the leading question and sub-questions in this research.

## 7 Conclusion

By using class observation, semi-interviews and questionnaires, this paper investigates the views of teachers and students from public high schools and private high schools in the same grade and in the same number in Pudong, Shanghai, on teaching culture while teaching language in the English classroom, and concludes the advantages and disadvantages of teaching language and culture together in the foreign language classroom. It will not only bring reference to language teaching in the future, but also help teachers to design curriculum content.

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