

The Role of Cultural Identity in English Language Learning in China

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Abstract: This paper reviews its characteristics in terms of research themes, challenges, and opportunities for English language teaching in China, as well as research limitations and perspectives, based on a summary of the research on cultural identity in EFL learning in China. The analysis shows that the existing research focuses on three main themes: the current situation and trend of cultural identity in EFL learning in China, cultural identity and language proficiency, and factors affecting cultural identity. Language learning is not only about mastering language skills, but also about understanding and accepting the cultural factors in communication. Although the research results are relatively rich, we can find that the longitudinal research on cultural identity in EFL learning in China is not enough, and the exploration of the relationship between other population information and cultural identity is also limited. To strengthen the research, it is necessary to expand longitudinal studies and broaden the significance of the study.

1. Introduction

Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China has received a great deal of attention because of China's growing global influence (Hu, 2003) and the importance of English proficiency in an international context. However, language learning is not just about acquiring language skills; it also involves understanding and accepting cultural factors in communication (Ou, 2007). Cultural identity plays a crucial role in shaping Chinese EFL learners' attitudes, motivation, and language use (Gao, Cheng, Zhao, & Zhou, 2003a; Gao, Cheng, Zhao, & Zhou, 2003b).^[1] In the field of language education, it is crucial to understand the role of cultural identity in EFL learning. By examining the impact of cultural identity, this review contributes to the development of effective teaching strategies and policies to meet the needs of Chinese EFL learners in cross-cultural contexts. Recognizing the significance of cultural identity research is crucial for EFL practitioners and policymakers. It enables them to create inclusive and culturally sensitive learning environments that foster learners' sense of belonging, motivation, and engagement. In addition, understanding the impact of cultural identity on EFL learning equips educators with the knowledge and tools to

address challenges and capitalize on opportunities related to cultural diversity in the classroom. The main purpose of this literature review is to comprehensively analyze the role of cultural identity in Chinese EFL learning. It looks at the themes behind current research in China about the role of cultural identity in Chinese EFL learning. It also tries to summarize the main findings and insights of cultural identity research in the context of EFL learning in China and talks about the challenges and opportunities that previous research on cultural identity in EFL learning in China brings for English language teaching in China. It examines learners at different levels and educational settings, focusing on research conducted in China. Through a wide range of studies, this review aims to provide a holistic understanding of the complex relationship between cultural identity and EFL learning.^[2]

Therefore, this paper raises the following research questions:

What are the main research themes that current domestic academic research categorizes in the role of cultural identity in Chinese EFL learning?

What do previous studies on cultural identity in Chinese EFL learning reveal?

What challenges and opportunities do previous studies on cultural identity in Chinese EFL learning bring to English language teaching in China?

This review will first analyze the major research themes in current domestic academic studies on the role of cultural identity in Chinese EFL learning. Next, it will summarize the major findings of previous research on cultural identity in Chinese EFL learning.^[3] Subsequently, this review will discuss the challenges and opportunities that cultural identity research brings to EFL teaching in China. Finally, this review will discuss the potential impact of cultural identity research on the future direction of the EFL teaching field in China.^[4] It will provide suggestions for further research and emphasize the importance of integrating cultural knowledge and cultural awareness into EFL teaching. Through a comprehensive literature review, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on cultural identity issues in EFL learning in China, inform future research directions, and provide practical insights for EFL practitioners and policymakers.^[5]

2. Methodology

2.1 Identifying literature sources

This review used several primary search terms, with major themes including "cultural identity" and "learning English." Secondary themes include "mother tongue culture," "target language culture," "foreign language learners," "native culture," and "learning English." There are also some keywords related to the field, such as "Chinese cultural identity" and "English language education," to increase the likelihood of finding relevant literature.^[6] We searched the CNKI database and obtained 170 related articles after finding all the relevant keywords. Finally, we selected 59 articles based on the following criteria: (1) We selected only journal articles because they provide the main source of empirical data. (2) We selected literature published within the last 20 years, i.e., 2002–2022. (3) We screened the literature for relevance to the topic and consistency with the purpose of the review by examining the abstracts, keywords, and introductions of each publication. (4) Read the selected literature intensively and remove those of poor quality. However, these articles have significant limitations: (1) Time constraints for literature publication. Ignoring some earlier studies may affect the comprehensiveness and correctness of the study. (2) The limited number of articles selected may not be able to cover all relevant studies. (3) The sources of articles are limited to journal articles, but books, conference papers, and reports may also provide important information.^[7]

2.2 Data extraction

The researcher entered data from all 59 articles into an Excel spreadsheet. This information included the year of publication, author's name, study population, research methodology, research questions, and main conclusions.

2.3 Data analysis

After that, the researchers used thematic analysis to categorize the 59 articles into three key themes and then summarized and analyzed the research results according to these themes. The researchers divided the theme "the Role of Cultural Identity in EFL Learning in China" into three major themes: the current situation and trend of cultural identity in EFL learning in China, cultural identity and language proficiency, and factors affecting cultural identity.^[8]

3. Findings and discussion

3.1 Research Themes of Cultural Identity in EFL Learning in China

3.1.1 Current Cultural Identity Situation and Trends

Current cultural identity trends are significant for research, especially in Chinese college students' English language learning. Lu and Jin's (2013) study on Chinese college students' cultural identity over the past decade revealed significant changes and relationships with traditional culture, providing crucial insights.^[9]

Among the studies on college students' identification with Anglo-American culture, Ren's (2010) study on Chinese non-English major college students' Anglo-American culture identification found that enhancing diversity of teaching materials and changing concepts promotes this identity. Ren's (2014) study found an upward trend in this identification; based on this, Wang's (2014) study examined Chinese art students' identification with Anglo-American culture, analyzing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Yu's (2013) study examined adolescents' cognitive identification with American culture in Jilin Province, emphasizing global influence. However, Gao's (2010) study explores Chinese cultural identity in English language teaching, highlighting its content, principles, and implementation methods. Zhong's (2011) study highlights the significant role of English teaching content, motivation, and learning time in shaping the national identity of Chinese learners. Kong & Li's (2013) study emphasizes the importance of Chinese cultural identity education in English language teaching, emphasizing the need to abandon traditional linguistic forms in the face of globalization. This study highlights the historical and practical benefits of enhancing Chinese cultural identity education. On this basis, Wang (2014) emphasizes two-way cultural interchange and proposes the notion of "beauty and commonality" to examine English education's localized approach.

In addition, university English education in China uses Chinese linguistic and cultural traits as a member of the world English variation family, expressing affiliation with Chinese language and culture (Zhang, 2014). Guo and Ren (2014) suggest integrating Chinese culture into Chinese English professional education by raising instructors' awareness, reforming the major curriculum, and incorporating it into extracurriculars. Lin (2014) highlights a cultural identity crisis among Chinese English learners due to biased input, a lack of mother tongue culture, and Western influence, suggesting building English learners' cultural identity on national traditional culture and enhancing national pride. On this basis, Zhang's (2015) study identifies reasons for cultural loss in foreign language learning and suggests restoring ethnic group cultural identity to enhance students'

cultural awareness, thereby enhancing English teaching, materials, and research value (Liu, 2014). In university English teaching, Zhejiang Province university students have in-depth understanding and good views toward native culture, especially sophomores with better cognitive abilities (Zhang, 2016). This shows how cognition and emotion shape native culture identification. However, Feng, An, and Zhu (2015) found that some English majors preferred European and American cultures, maybe due to the US's international standing and strong cultures' aggression. Government, society, and institutions should act to resolve young students' cultural identity crises (Feng et al., 2015). To sum up, Yang (2016) states that while college students' cultural identities may vary, their overall health and structure do not indicate a cultural identity crisis.

In recent years, researchers in China have studied English education's impact on students' cultural identity, proposing strategies to strengthen it and promote Chinese culture in colleges and universities.

Zhang's (2018) study revealed English majors at Xi'an College identified with Chinese culture, while Han and Qin's (2020) study highlighted the issue of a lack of Chinese cultural identity in English education and suggested strategies to enhance students' cultural identity. Liu's (2021) and Li's (2022) studies emphasize the significance of English education in spreading Chinese culture and enhancing global influence. Yang and Shen (2022) found that deepening English learning leads to the formation of new cultural identities, highlighting the need for cultural identity education. This indicates that English learning positively impacts students' cultural identity and mother tongue, promoting openness and diversity in cultural identity. This fosters bilingual learning, intercultural awareness, and language competence.

To summarize, the studies reveal the importance of promoting Chinese cultural identity and Western cultural identity in English education for college students. They suggest strengthening these aspects to enhance intercultural competence. However, further research is needed to understand the mechanisms, influencing factors, and educational strategies of cultural identity in order to better meet students' needs and cultivate well-rounded talents.

3.1.2 Cultural Identity and Language Proficiency

On the topic of "Cultural Identity and Linguistic Competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learning in China," scholars have studied it from the following three perspectives: English language learning and self-identity, English language learning and Anglo-American and local cultural identities, cultural teaching strategies and English language learning.

3.1.2.1 English Language Learning and Self-Identity

A series of studies on English language learning, motivation, and self-identity covering samples of undergraduate and graduate students were conducted by Gao et al. These studies found that the type of English learning motivation and motivational intensity were related to changes in learners' self-identity (Gao, Zhao, Cheng & Zhou, 2002; Gao, Cheng, Zhao & Zhou, 2003b; Li, Gao & Qian, 2003). Personal background factors such as gender, grade, and major also have an impact on motivational intensity and self-identity change (Gao, Cheng, Zhao, & Zhou, 2003a; Li, Gao, & Qian, 2003; Gao et al., 2003b). The results of this study show that English language learning has a significant impact on learners' self-perception and self-confidence, productivity, and cultural values and communication styles (Gao et al., 2003a; Ma & Cao, 2004; Gao & Zhou, 2008). In addition, the study found that students' motivation and self-identity would change to some extent during the English learning process (Liu & Gao, 2010).

Based on Gao and Zhou's (2008) study, Bian's (2011) study is consistent with Gao and Zhou's (2008) study in some aspects of identity change. They both pointed out that cutback changes were

prevalent and deepened among learners and that self-confidence changes had an important place in learners' self-identification. However, there are some differences between the two studies in terms of the population and the stage of the study. Bian's study focused on learners at the senior level, whereas Gao and Zhou's study focused on learners at the university foundation level. Therefore, there may be some differences between them regarding the specifics and trends of identity change. Gao and Zhou's (2008) study, as well as Xue and Han's (2012) and (2014) studies, dealt with the cultural identity change of English learners. While Xue and Han (2012) first proposed the concept of bilingual cultural identity for ELLs, the study found that instrumental bilingual identity was the most dominant type of identity in the Chinese context, while additive and productive identity were the main trends. Xue and Han's (2014) study also mentioned that in the process of language learning, learners may form a new "Anglicized" identity on the basis of maintaining the cultural identity of their mother tongue. This is in line with the changes in learners' cultural identity described in Gao and Zhou's (2008) study.

The above studies show that English language learning has a significant effect on learners' self-concept, self-confidence, and cultural identity. Personal background factors such as gender, grade level, and major also have an impact on motivation and self-identity. In addition, motivation and self-identity change during the learning process, and new cultural identities may be formed. These studies are of great guiding significance for English education and the enhancement of intercultural communicative competence, and they help to promote learners' overall development and identity construction. However, these studies are limited by factors such as sample limitations, definitional ambiguity, and cultural context bias, and further research is needed to gain deeper insights into the field.

3.1.2.2 English Language Learning and Anglo-American Cultural Identity and Local Cultural Identity

Scholars have explored the relationship between English learning and Anglo-American and local cultural identity. Ou (2007) argued that identifying with British and American culture enhances English learning and understanding while also fostering a better integration of these cultures. Shao, Zhao, and Sun (2011) found a weak positive correlation between learners' cultural identification with the target language and pragmatic performance and a strong negative correlation between learners' identification with their mother tongue culture. Subsequently, Ren's study on Anglo-American cultural identity among non-English major college students found a weakly positive correlation with English proficiency (Ren, 2012; Ren, 2014). However, Qin (2012) found that English learning significantly impacts self-identity, but the validity of the correlation between English language learning and cultural identity depends on the specific definition of the two, as Chinese contexts do not share the target language culture. Scholars are exploring the connection between learners' English cultural identity and their native language cultural identity, finding a mutually beneficial and deepening relationship (Han & Xue, 2012). Moreover, Wu (2021) found that college students can skillfully adapt to the target language and culture without replacing their mother tongue and culture. This promotes a harmonious relationship between the target language and mother tongue culture, aligning with Han and Xue's (2012) findings.

Some scholars are very positive about the ethnic minority English majors' identification with both their mother tongue culture and English culture. Cao and Wang (2013) and Jia and Su (2014) found that this group positively identified with both their mother tongue culture and English culture. However, Wang (2014) found that ethnic minority students positively identify with their mother tongue culture, and foreign language learning doesn't directly affect this. Subsequently, Wang (2015) found that English cultural identity positively impacts English learning outcomes, particularly in listening, reading, and writing. Scholars suggest a positive correlation between Anglo-American

cultural identity and English learning motivation, with senior students' Anglo-American identity having significant predictive power (Song & Chen, 2016). However, Zhang (2016) found no statistical significance in this correlation.

In recent years, research has highlighted the significance of incorporating Chinese cultural identity education into English language teaching, promoting mother tongue cultural identity and intercultural communicative competence.

Scholars agree that incorporating Chinese culture in English language teaching can enhance students' cultural awareness, confidence, and cross-cultural communicative competence, as supported by studies by Dong (2018), Huang and Mo (2019), Ma (2020), and Shen (2020). Native language cultural identity is crucial for students' intercultural communicative competence, as it helps them express their mother tongue culture in English and promotes true intercultural communication, according to scholars such as Lei and Wang (2019), Yuan (2020), and Shen (2020). Furthermore, scholars also consider the integration of Chinese cultural identity education as a significant initiative. Scholars Huang and Mo (2019) and Shen (2020) emphasized the importance of integrating Chinese cultural identity education into English language teaching to strengthen students' cultural identity and self-confidence. These studies significantly influence English language teaching practices, fostering students' cultural identity and intercultural communicative competence.

Due to some inconsistencies and definitional ambiguities in the findings, further research is needed to deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between English language learning and cultural identity, which emphasizes Chinese culture education and native cultural identity integration.

3.1.2.3 Cultural Teaching Strategies and English Language Learning

Several scholars have explored the relationship between cultural teaching strategies and English language learning, focusing on how to incorporate cultural elements in English language teaching to promote learners' cultural identity and language proficiency. Researchers have proposed a variety of specific strategies and methods, such as learning English cultural content (Ou, 2010), specific research strategies for university English teaching under the perspective of cultural identity (Yu, 2019), introducing Chinese culture, making cultural comparisons (Han & Qin, 2020), and guiding students to understand socialist core values (Hu & Xiao, 2022).

These approaches aim to develop students' identification with English and Chinese culture, help learners better understand and express Chinese culture, and improve their language proficiency to promote cultural integration and multicultural awareness. These studies provide a theoretical basis for a cultural identity perspective in university English language teaching and emphasize the importance of developing students' intercultural communicative competence and identification with Chinese culture. However, these studies lack empirical validation and comparative research and ignore implementation challenges. Future research should remedy these limitations by delving into the effects and challenges of cultural teaching strategies in order to provide more comprehensive instruction.

3.1.3 Factors influencing cultural identity

Several factors influence an individual's cultural identity in the context of English language learning, as revealed by many studies.

First of all, Ren's (2011) study reveals a correlation between English learning time and Anglo-American cultural identity but suggests learning time isn't the sole determinant of cultural identity. Furthermore, factors such as extracurricular English learning time, major, age, years of

learning, gender, family background, extrinsic motivation, and age of onset of learning were found to influence cultural identity in Ren's (2014) study. This suggests that individuals' understanding and adjustment of their identity may change during English learning. Factors such as professional background, age, gender, family background, extrinsic motivation, and English learning experience, in addition to learning time, can influence cultural identity. Wang's (2015) study found that individual background factors, such as gender, grade level, and ethnic composition, significantly influence the formation of an English-language cultural identity. This indicates that individual background factors play an important role in the formation of cultural identity. Du's (2015) study found a significant correlation between cultural identity anxiety and English proficiency among EFL learners in Chinese universities, suggesting that individual cultural identity may be influenced by English proficiency and place of origin and correlated with identity anxiety. Hu (2017) also found that cultural identity and anxiety among EFL learners in local colleges and universities are influenced by English proficiency and place of origin, as well as suggesting the incorporation of elements of local culture. So it requires educators and policymakers to incorporate local cultural elements into English education programs.

Teaching English to Chinese college students affects their cultural identity in their mother tongue, and strengthening local cultural education is considered necessary; therefore, classroom teaching in colleges and universities has been suggested to incorporate civic and political content that strengthens cultural self-confidence (Liang, 2020) because civic and political courses can help students enhance their sense of cultural identity and cultural self-confidence (Zeng & Xu, 2023). This finding further emphasizes the importance of the civics curriculum in shaping students' cultural identities. Finally, Wang's (2023) study reveals that students' gender and grade level significantly influence their cultural identity and self-confidence, indicating that personal characteristics also influence cultural identity.

To conclude, personal traits, learning background, English learning experience, and social context affect cultural identity. These findings help instructors develop students' cultural identity and self-confidence and inform policymaking. Synthesizing these data helps educators and policymakers build English language and cultural education techniques that fit students' requirements and boost their cultural identity and self-confidence. These studies did not examine intergroup cultural identity variations or the effects of birthplace and course selection. Thus, future research must better understand these cultural identity components and their interactions. Instructors must also emphasize cultural identity and its influences on second language learning. Teachers should promote cultural identification and language development by tailoring their methods to each student.

4. Challenges and Opportunities for English Language Teaching in China

Research on the importance of cultural identity in teaching English in China presents challenges and opportunities for English language teaching in China. First, due to sample limitations and differences in conceptual definitions, it may be difficult for educators to accurately assess students' cultural identity needs, resulting in less precise instructional goal-setting. Second, the lack of a fully representative sample and methodological limitations make it difficult for educators to determine the most appropriate teaching strategies and methods for their students. At the same time, students may face challenges of cultural conflict during the ELL process, and educators may have difficulty accurately grasping the nature and implications of these issues. Lack of a comprehensive understanding of students' cultural identity experiences may result in educators' inability to appropriately deal with cultural conflicts, affecting their learning experiences and outcomes. Finally, due to sample limitations and methodological constraints, it may be difficult for educators to

accurately select and design instructional resources and materials that are appropriate for students from diverse cultural backgrounds in order to facilitate teaching and learning for cultural identity integration.

However, this study also presents opportunities. First, it deepens the understanding of the importance of cultural identity in English language teaching in China, reminding educators and policymakers to pay more attention to students' cultural identity needs and incorporate them into curriculum and instructional design. Second, the study can help educators better understand the cultural conflicts and challenges that students may face in the process of learning English and promote students' intercultural communicative competence through appropriate teaching strategies and intercultural communication development. In addition, the study of cultural identity provides educators with a perspective for understanding students' cultural backgrounds and needs. Educators can utilize this perspective to introduce diverse teaching resources and content to enable learners to better understand and appreciate language and communication styles from different cultural backgrounds.

5. Limitations and Prospects of the Study

Despite substantial progress in research on how cultural identity affects the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) in China, the relevant literature still has some limitations.

First, the number of longitudinal studies is insufficient. With the exception of the study by Gao Yihong's group, most of the studies in recent years have focused on the horizontal status of cultural identity rather than its development trend. This is because cultural identity is a psychological concept, and horizontal surveys cannot fully grasp the pattern of cultural identity of research subjects. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies of the development trend of cultural identity in order to explore the pattern of change of cultural identity and to study the factors affecting its development as a basis for providing more precise guidance and strategies.

Second, the consideration of plurality is insufficient. Cultural identity is influenced by a variety of factors, such as language, education, family, and social environment. However, some studies have some limitations in considering plurality and need to further explore the complex effects of different factors on cultural identity and conduct comprehensive analysis. Future research should focus on the relationship between EFL learners' cultural identity and other demographic factors, such as family background, place of birth, students' different course selections, and self-efficacy in learning English.

Third, research sample limitations. We reviewed a large number of studies focusing on higher education but did not consider the role of cultural identity in primary and secondary education (Jiang and Yang, 2020). The limited generalizability of the results may be attributed to this sample selection, highlighting the need for a wider and more diverse sample to validate the findings. Future research should focus on filling these gaps by conducting longitudinal studies at all educational levels to investigate the long-term effects of incorporating cultural identity into the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Fourth, research has methodological limitations. Some studies relied too heavily on questionnaires as the primary data collection method, which may have led to subjectivity and error in respondents' answers. In addition, some studies may lack a comprehensive analysis of multiple methods, limiting a comprehensive understanding of the issues. Future studies may adopt multiple methods and combine qualitative and quantitative data to obtain more accurate and comprehensive information.

6. Conclusion

Cultural identity refers to the identification of members with their cultural belonging, expressed through their actions, thoughts, and feelings (Liu, 2000). Moreover, the degree of identity influences how well learners integrate into the society of the target language and, to some extent, restricts the development of foreign language proficiency (Block, D., 2007). This paper reviews the research results on cultural identity in EFL learning in China in terms of research themes, summarizes the research themes and the challenges and opportunities for English language teaching in China, points out the current issues, and offers some predictions on future research trends. This review aims to provide English language teachers with a valuable resource and source of inspiration for selecting course materials and curriculum designs, as well as for conducting further research on cultural identity in EFL learning in China.

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