

Cultural-Historical Perspectives on Cross-Cultural Consciousness in China's New Elementary English Standards

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Abstract

The 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education in China denote an important shift toward developing “cultural awareness” as a core competency. However, the pragmatic implementation of “cross-cultural consciousness” in elementary English education remains fraught with pedagogical and structural tensions. Drawing upon Vygotsky’s Cultural-historical Theory, this paper assesses the current framework’s ability to move beyond a binary of “source culture” versus “target culture.” From a Vygotskian perspective, language is a psychological tool that mediates higher mental functions through social interaction. This study argues that the 2022 Standards risk reducing cultural learning to the acquisition of static knowledge rather than a dynamic process of social mediation. While the current Standards champion “cultural confidence” by weaving traditional Chinese elements into the curriculum, they inadvertently leave a “cultural vacuum” within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In this instructional space, a child’s lived experience. That is what Vygotsky terms the “everyday concept”—frequently clashes with, rather than merges into, the rigid cultural categories of the curriculum (the “scientific concept”). This failure to achieve a genuine dialectical synthesis stems from three systemic issues: the instrumentalization of cultural content, a stark imbalance in international representation, and a pervasive mediation deficit. These neat categories might help students practice basic comparisons, but they do not build a true intercultural “Third Space” where different cultural tools actually merge. Without that deeper friction, the lesson loses its transformative weight. The learner simply walks away unchanged, keeping their original identity completely untouched on one side of a superficial divide.

Keywords: intercultural consciousness, Vygotskian sociocultural theory, Chinese English education, curriculum standards, cultural identity

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Introduction

The state of English-language education in China has undergone continuous transformation, reflecting the nation's shifting socio-political priorities and developing relationship with the global community. The 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education sent a strong signal that prioritizing the implementation of the core competencies was moving toward “cultural awareness.” This shift features an ideology of integrating cultures.

How this cultural integration actually functions deserves a closer look. Current language pedagogy draws a clear line between “cross-cultural” and “intercultural” competence. A cross-cultural approach tends to treat cultures as fixed, separate entities to be compared from the outside. Intercultural competence, however, centers on the active negotiation of meaning and identity within a fluid “Third Space.” This is more than a debate over terminology; it shapes our underlying assumptions about how a student interacts with a foreign language and the culture embedded within it.

This study uses Lev Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology as an analytical system to evaluate the cross-cultural consciousness embedded within the 2022 Elementary English Standards. Vygotsky's ideas about the social origins of higher psychological functions and the changing nature of internalization provide a strong lens for examining how the standards conceptualize the learner's interaction with the foreign “Other.” Through a detailed textual analysis of the curriculum's stated objectives, pedagogical recommendations, and definitions of core competencies, we argue that the 2022 Standards manifest a cross-cultural rather than an intercultural orientation. The document uses intercultural terminology, but its actual structure reduces cultural engagement to mere observation, identification, and comparison. This setup completely misses the deeper self-transformation that Vygotsky considered the highest stage of cultural development.

Literature Review: Defining the Cultural Lens

To carefully examine the cultural dimensions of the 2022 Standards, it is necessary to first delineate the conceptual boundaries between cross-cultural and intercultural paradigms. These conceptions offer divergent conceptualizations of what culture is, how it functions in language learning, and what the ultimate outcomes of cultural encounters should be.

The Cross-Cultural Paradigm: Observation and Comparison

The cross-cultural approach, frequently associated with the basic work of scholars like Milton Bennett (1998), views cultures as distinct, relatively stable entities. In this paradigm, culture is treated as an external variable—a set of identifiable traits, behaviors, and values belonging to a specific national or ethnic group. The main mechanism of cross-cultural learning is observation and comparison. Learners are positioned as observers who examine the similarities and differences between their native culture (Culture A) and the target culture (Culture B).

Under this system, the learner's identity is a stable, fixed membership within their home culture. The goal of language education is to furnish learners with knowledge of the target culture to minimize confusion and promote seamless interactions. As Bennett notes, this strategy concentrates on “comparison among distinct, static entities.” Cultures are variables to be measured against one another. While this reduces ethnocentrism via acknowledging cultural differences, it rarely demands a fundamental reconstruction of the learner's own identity. The

outcome is cognitive knowledge of group traits rather than profound social and psychological growth.

The Intercultural Paradigm: Dialogic Interaction and the Third Space

Kramsch (1993, 1998) rejects the idea that cultures are fixed, self-contained blocks, treating them instead as fluid processes built through discourse. This framework puts dialogue at the very center of interculturality. The objective is no longer just decoding an unfamiliar “Other”—it is tracking how the self and the Other actually encounter one another to negotiate and build meaning in real time.

Kramsch’s framework concerns “the Third Space,” or Third Place. It is the idea of a zone between learners, operating within the strict domains of their L1 culture externally, without being assimilated into the L2 culture. In the space of the zone, identity becomes a fluid of “becoming,” that is, kept under negotiation and challenge.

Culture shifts from an auxiliary static subject of study into an active tool for making meaning. At the same time, learning moves past the mere observation of differences and requires deep, personal engagement. The payoff isn’t just content knowledge, but a broader cognitive and social evolution that gives rise to a genuinely hybrid subjectivity.

Key Differences at a Glance

The dichotomy between these two lenses can be summarized along four dimensions:

- **Role of Culture:** The cross-cultural perspective, culture is an external variable or category. In the intercultural view, it is a psychological and linguistic toolkit for meaning-making.
- **Identity:** The cross-cultural paradigm assumes stable, fixed membership. The intercultural paradigm embraces dynamic, fluid identity formation (becoming).
- **Mechanism:** Cross-culturalism relies on observing differences. Interculturality demands participation and transformation.
- **Outcome:** The former yields knowledge of group traits; the latter yields cognitive and social growth.

Theoretical Framework: Vygotskian Cultural-Historical Perspectives

Social Origins of Higher Psychological Functions

A keystone of Vygotskian theory is the genetic law of cultural development. Vygotsky (1978, p. 57) famously argued: “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level (interpsychological), and later, on the individual level (intrapsychological).” This means that higher psychological processes—such as critical thinking, voluntary attention, and intercultural consciousness—are not innate but are formed through social interaction mediated by cultural tools, most notably language.

In the context of language education, encountering a foreign language and culture constitutes an interpsychological event. It is a social relation with the “Other.” If language learning is restricted to rote memorization or the mere coding of native thoughts into foreign symbols, the social level is impoverished, and the subsequent intrapsychological development is severely constrained.

Internalization as Transformation

Furthermore, Vygotsky emphasizes that internalization is not a process of passive absorption. “The process of internalization is not a simple transfer from outside to inside, but a transformation of the activity itself... Personality represents the sum of social relations internalized” (Vygotsky, 1997, Vol. 4, p. 106).

When a learner engages with a foreign culture interculturally, the internalization of those social relations changes their existing cognitive structures and identity. They do not simply “add” foreign facts to their memory; their subjectivity is radically changed by the dialectical tension between the native and the foreign. Therefore, an educational standard that aims for profound cultural awareness must facilitate this deep internalization, rather than merely asking students to catalog cultural artifacts.

Textual Analysis of the 2022 Elementary English Standards

Applying this conceptual framework to the 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education reveals a continuing tension between the document's stated goals and its underlying epistemological stance. While the standards champion “cultural awareness,” the specific language used throughout the text aligns overwhelmingly with the fixed, cross-cultural paradigm.

The Static Focus: Observation and Identification

A primary piece of textual evidence for this cross-cultural orientation is found in the curriculum's pedagogical directives. On page 18, the standard states that teaching should “Improve the ability to identify differences and similarities between Chinese and foreign cultures.”

From a Vygotskian standpoint, framing the learning process around “identification” is deeply flawed. The term betrays an epistemological bias, reducing the learner to an outsider staring at two neatly sealed, parallel containers of culture. The primary cognitive task becomes mere sorting and sorting again—noting that Culture A does this, while Culture B does that.

Sorting concepts into neat categories gives students basic comparative practice, but it doesn't create a true intercultural “Third Space” where different cultural tools can actually disrupt and merge with one another. Without that internal friction, the lesson loses its impact. The learner simply walks away with their identity untouched, safely parked on their own side of the divide.

Core Competencies: From Knowledge to Orthodoxy

The definition of “Cultural Awareness” as a core competency further illustrates this limitation. The standard (p. 4) defines cultural awareness as “students' understanding of Chinese and foreign cultures and their identification with outstanding cultures. It is manifested, in the context of the new era, in students' intercultural cognition, attitudes, and behavioral choices.”

While Vygotsky regards cultural awareness as the dynamic internalization of social interaction, the standard's phrasing—specifically the mandate to achieve “identification with outstanding culture”—reveals a divergent goal. In the wider socio-political context of the document, “outstanding culture” implicitly refers to orthodox Chinese traditions and contemporary

national narratives. The emphasis is on orthodoxy, cultural alignment, and ideological preservation, rather than on the dialectical negotiation and reconstruction of identity within a “Third Space.”

Because the desired outcome is a return to and fortification of a pre-existing identity, the process cannot properly be regarded as intercultural. It forecloses the possibility of identity evolution that Kramsch and Vygotsky identify as the hallmark of true cultural encounter.

Curriculum Objectives: The Monologue Strategy

The instrumentalist view of language in the standards is most evident in the stated curriculum objectives. On page 5, the document asserts: “Through English learning, students are able to strengthen cultural confidence, learn to tell China's stories in English, and present to the world a China that is authentic, multidimensional, and comprehensive.”

This objective embodies what we term the “Monologue Strategy.” It essentially means using English as a symbolic medium to project a domestic narrative outward. However, the curriculum does not explain how learners come to understand and integrate the cultural differences embedded within the English “language tool” itself. It assumes that English can be stripped of its cultural history and used purely as an objective code to transmit Chinese content.

This approach manifests three specific theoretical flaws regarding self-transformation:

1. **Symbol Swap:** English is used merely as a code for Chinese content. English symbols are mapped onto Chinese logic without altering the “psychological tool.” The language fails to mediate new ways of thinking.
2. **Internal Audience:** The mandate to “tell Chinese stories” is often observed in Chinese classrooms by Chinese students. This removes the authentic “Foreign Other,” effectively collapsing the social Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) necessary for intercultural growth.
3. **Identity Reinforcement:** The ultimate goal is to solidify a pre-existing national identity rather than allowing the identity to be rebuilt through encounters with difference.

Vygotsky argued that “we become ourselves through others.” When the “Other” is silenced, instrumentalized, or replaced by an internal shadow, the engine of mental and cultural development stalls. Through prioritizing the outward projection of the self (“telling China's stories”) over the dialogic intake of the Other, the 2022 Standard effectively promotes intra-cultural education under an intercultural label.

Pedagogical Recommendations and the Limit of Critical Thinking

The limitations of this approach also constrain the development of critical thinking. The pedagogical recommendations (p. 47) advise: “Teachers should guide students, in authentic contexts, to participate in language learning activities characterized by comprehensiveness, connectedness, and usefulness, including observation, analysis, comparison, evaluation, and creation.”

These verbs imply rigorous cognitive work, but they ultimately serve a very narrow purpose. The earlier directive to “identify with excellent culture” (p. 4) shifts the entire goal of critical thinking. It stops being an open-ended exploration and becomes a way to validate a

predetermined narrative. Within this policy framework, critical inquiry is essentially repurposed to “tell the story well” and protect local identity from outside ideological influence.

Conversely, the Vygotskian view proposes that critical thinking should serve as a meta-cognitive tool that permits individuals to objectify their own culture. True critical interculturality involves turning the analytical look inward, identifying the constructed nature of one's own cultural assumptions, and achieving a higher, more objective level of self-consciousness. The curriculum, by restricting analysis to “similarities and differences” (p. 18), arrests this development at the cross-cultural stage. It uses English as a medium for representing fixed national content (Cultural Display) and recognizing similarities and differences across cultures (Cross-cultural comparison), but stops short of Third-space negotiation, identity reconstruction, and self-transformation (Interculturality).

Discussion

The findings of this textual analysis reveal a sophisticated but fundamentally defensive posture in the 2022 English Curriculum Standards. The document attempts a subtle balancing act: it seeks to provide students with the global signifier (the English language) while thoroughly protecting the local signified (Chinese cultural identity).

While this defensive strategy hits the policy target of building “Cultural Confidence”—effectively turning English class into a tool for national storytelling—it functions primarily to shield young learners from the identity fragmentation of globalization.

From a cultural-historical standpoint, however, this insulation carries a heavy developmental penalty. By systematically avoiding cross-cultural friction, the curriculum side-steps the internal crisis and self-transformation that Vygotsky saw as the very engine of cognitive growth.

To close this gap and move from a cross-cultural to a genuinely intercultural curriculum, subsequent iterations of the standard—and the localized syllabi developed from it—must integrate explicit mechanisms for self-transformation. This requires moving past static comparisons to embrace dynamic identity formation.

Conclusion

The 2022 Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards mark a major shift in China's educational policy by putting cultural awareness front and center. Yet from a Vygotskian perspective, the framework remains stubbornly cross-cultural. It treats different cultures as parallel, separate entities to be observed and compared from a distance, using English simply as a neutral tool to reinforce and broadcast a predetermined national identity.

The curriculum certainly pushes for cultural confidence and global awareness, but it stops short of being genuinely intercultural. It overlooks what actually happens during a cultural encounter—how identities shift and how meaning is negotiated in those spaces between. If primary English instruction is going to spark serious cognitive and social development, students can't just stare at the “Other” across a safe conceptual divide. Real cultural awareness requires the kind of difficult, unpredictable dialogue that alters the relationship entirely.

Future standards need to explicitly state that cultural encounters should reshape learners, rather than merely provide them with information. This requires shifting policy language to treat identity as something fluid and constantly negotiated. Crucially, the accompanying pedagogical guidelines must pin down what third-space mediation actually looks like in practice—illustrating how meaning is built in that middle ground where neither culture remains static.

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