

*Evaluating Western Cultural Content in Chinese Middle School English Textbooks Using the Zone of Proximal Development*

Peihan Ji, Wenzhou University, China  
Yujie Su, Wenzhou University, China  
Vivian Ngan-Lin Lei, Macao Polytechnic University, China  
Xiaoshu Xu, Wenzhou University, China  
Yuqing Dai, Wenzhou University, China

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**Abstract**

With the increasing communication between China and other parts of the world, cross-cultural education has become increasingly important, necessitating the examination of non-Chinese, particularly Western, cultural elements in English education. Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) theory emphasizes the critical role of development space in students' growth and supports the idea that the inclusion of Western elements in teaching materials acts as a scaffold for students to learn about Western culture. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of textbook compilation from three perspectives: students' current level, potential development level, and auxiliary support, using ZPD theory. By examining the Western cultural content in Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) textbooks through a mixed methods approach, including analysis, questionnaires, and interviews, it was found that the assessment of students' current level is relatively lacking, and the scaffolding for auxiliary cultural teaching is minimal and often overlooked. The study suggests enhancing the evaluation of student's current level, emphasizing Western cultural connotations, presenting multicultural contrasts, increasing interest and authenticity, and adding auxiliary supports to better facilitate students' cognitive and psychological development.

Keywords: Zone of Proximal Development, FLTRP, Middle School English Textbooks, Western Culture, Culture Evaluation

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## Introduction

In the context of contemporary globalization, fostering cross-cultural communication and enhancing mutual understanding have become paramount imperatives. Recent years have seen China's education system prioritizing the development of students' cross-cultural competence to address the challenges posed by globalization. This has been achieved through comprehensive reforms, including examination modifications, syllabus revisions, and textbook updates (Wu et al., 2024). The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education in Junior High Schools (2022 edition) issued by the Ministry of Education emphasize the cultivation of cultural awareness and outline requirements for cross-cultural cognition, attitude, and behaviour. Scholars generally agree that cross-cultural competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Hu, 2013). The absence of direct assessment of cross-cultural communication in entrance examinations has led some teachers to neglect cultural teaching. Although the importance of cultural competence is acknowledged in new curriculum reforms, teachers' cognitive gaps, insufficient skills, and practical challenges hinder the effective development of students' intercultural communication abilities (Li & Li, 2023). A survey by Zhang (2014) revealed that 90 percent of students have never communicated with native English speakers. Additionally, most English teachers have never been abroad. Ning (2018) further corroborates this view, highlighting the influence of social environment and exam-oriented education as significant factors contributing to this outcome.

Schools play a crucial role in implementing intercultural education, with foreign language teaching serving as the most effective and significant means of fostering intercultural competence (Li & Li, 2023). Wang and Li (2017) assert that textbook research is a critical component of foreign language pedagogy, holding substantial importance for the development of the discipline. English textbooks, which incorporate Western cultural elements, serve as essential tools for students to understand the Western world—encompassing various nations and states in Australasia, Western Europe, and North America—and to convey intercultural communicative competence.

Moreover, Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) theory underscores the pivotal role of teaching in children's development. This theory posits that teaching should not merely train and reinforce existing psychological functions but should also stimulate and develop new ones (Yu, 2004). Within this framework, the inclusion of Western cultural elements in textbooks serves as a scaffold to aid students in their cultural learning and cognitive development, helping them achieve their highest potential.

Therefore, this paper applies the ZPD theory to set assessment criteria for Western cultural elements in English textbooks. Meanwhile, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) is a prominent publisher of English textbooks in China, widely incorporating Western cultural elements into its middle school English textbooks. Thus, the research explores whether the presentation and organization of these elements in FLTRP's teaching materials align with students' cognitive abilities and mastery. To draw meaningful conclusions, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How does the theory of the "zone of proximal development" reflect Western culture in the FLTRP textbooks?
- 2) Based on the ZPD theory, is the design and organization of Western cultural content in FLTRP junior middle school English textbooks effective?

- 3) How can the Western cultural content in FLTRP junior high school English textbooks be optimized to better align with the ZPD theory and improve students' learning outcomes?

By analysing the Western cultural content in textbooks and conducting user surveys and interviews, this study aims to provide more targeted and diverse teaching guidance for junior middle school English education in China. Additionally, it seeks to offer substantive suggestions for future textbook compilation and teaching practices.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Zone of Proximal Development***

The theoretical research on the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) originated from Vygotsky's 1935 book, *The Intellectual Development of Children in the Teaching Process*. In this seminal work, Vygotsky delineated the gap between the actual developmental level of children, characterized by their ability to solve problems independently, and their potential developmental level, defined by their capacity to solve problems under adult guidance or in collaboration with more competent peers. In the late 1970s, Vygotsky's theory was introduced to Western academia, sparking significant scholarly interest and continuous study, which culminated in what has been termed the “Vygotsky research fever.” Western scholars' research confirmed the theory's pedagogical value and underscored the importance of mediated learning. For instance, American psychologist Reuven Feuerstein argued that cognitive development results from mediated learning, proposing that mediation enables children to grasp the significance of learning activities and ultimately enhances their cognitive adaptability through internalization.

In China, Vygotsky's ZPD theory is frequently mentioned in educational psychology and child psychology textbooks, though it is often confined to brief introductions. Liang Aimin (as cited in Qi, 2003) articulated the principles of transcendence and dynamics within the context of the ZPD concept and its application in teaching development. According to literature reviews, the ZPD theory has been applied across various educational levels, including ordinary middle schools, higher vocational colleges, and universities, highlighting its broad applicability. However, in terms of teaching content, the focus has predominantly been on knowledge areas such as reading and vocabulary within English teaching. There is a noticeable lack of application in cultivating middle school students' cultural awareness, indicating an imbalance in the distribution of teaching content in English education (Guo, 2018). To date, there is a dearth of applied research on the ZPD theory within China, which starkly contrasts with the extensive research conducted abroad (Guo et al., 2023).

Research on the ZPD has flourished internationally over the past 20 years, integrating extensively with theories of scaffolding, dynamic assessment, and sociocultural theory. However, the majority of these studies focus on teacher instruction and the development of students' basic skills, with limited exploration of the application of ZPD in conjunction with teaching materials. Notable exceptions include the work of Dijana Plut and colleagues, who utilized teaching materials as tools to support cultural learning, thereby transferring these materials from a traditional instructional context to a broader cultural framework. Vygotsky emphasized the centrality of cultural tools in his theory, describing them as the building blocks of development and cultural infrastructure (Plut & Pešić, 2003). Furthermore, Raab Vass and colleagues (2011) demonstrated that textbooks could provide significant material

support for students' knowledge acquisition. Similarly, Infant and colleagues (2021) re-examined the importance of providing dialogue support to learners using teaching materials in real tasks, proposing mediation development based on this theoretical foundation, suggesting that concept-based teaching materials serve as cognitive tools to regulate learners' second language use.

### ***Cultural Research in Middle School English Textbooks***

Since the 1960s, cultural teaching has become a prominent topic in foreign language education, driven by the rise and development of sociolinguistics, social psychology, grammar, and cross-cultural communication. Consequently, integrating culture into teaching materials has sparked considerable academic discussion. For example, Hua and Vien (2023) explored how to incorporate culture into English teaching within the context of Vietnamese language instruction, advocating for the inclusion of multicultural content in English textbooks. Nguyen and Cao (2019) conducted a similar study on the cultural content of Vietnamese textbooks, analyzing the materials from cross-cultural and critical perspectives. They found that the textbooks primarily focused on training students to use English for communication with English-speaking countries, neglecting the promotion of cross-cultural learning.

In China, research on cultural content in textbooks, particularly in junior middle school English textbooks remains scarce. Yu (2023) summarized findings from statistical analyses of English textbook research papers published in eight domestic CSSCI journals between 2000 and 2022. On average, only seven articles per year addressed English teaching materials. Moreover, research on English textbooks for basic education constitutes just 17.3% of the total 156 articles, despite this educational stage being crucial for the formation of students' character and values. The content selection, design, and use of textbooks play a pivotal role in student development. Existing studies tend to focus more on ideological and political elements and Chinese cultural content, with fewer investigations into FLTRP's English textbooks. Guo (2018) employed keywords such as “zone of proximal development,” “middle school English teaching materials,” “Western culture,” and “new curriculum standards” in a full-text database search of Chinese journals, yielding limited results. Specifically, there were 333 titles and 1,167 abstracts for “zone of proximal development,” but none for “Western Culture in Middle School English Textbooks,” and only 3 abstracts. Similarly, “zone of proximal development + English Teaching” yielded 61 titles and 242 abstracts, whereas “Western Culture + New Curriculum Standards” had no titles and only 13 abstracts.

Huang Dan and Huang Li (2023) have also emphasized the need for enriched research on cultivating intercultural communicative awareness in junior middle school English teaching. Existing literature on this topic predominantly focuses on senior high schools and universities, with relatively few studies at the junior middle school level. Over the past decade, only 63 relevant studies have been conducted. In higher education, courses on British and American culture and intercultural communication are common, leading to more extensive research. However, in basic education, English instruction often prioritizes language knowledge and test-taking skills, making it challenging for students to systematically learn about domestic and foreign cultures. As a result, studies on cultivating cultural awareness in junior middle school English teaching are limited.

In the realm of basic education, teaching materials are pivotal in integrating students' cultural awareness with their language learning. While theoretical research on the ZPD frequently emphasizes internal theoretical guidance, there is a notable deficiency in practical research. Conversely, textbook research predominantly focuses on practical applications. To address this gap, this study adopts a dual approach, combining “internal theoretical research” with “external practical research.” This methodology aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the application and impact of the ZPD theory in the context of teaching materials and cultural education.

## **Methods**

In this study, a mixed method was employed, including content analysis, questionnaires, and interviews. Content analysis examined the Western cultural content in FLTRP's New Standard English textbooks to assess alignment with Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" theory. Questionnaires were administered to 71 middle school students to evaluate their understanding and perceptions of this content. Interviews with four experienced English teachers provided insights into the practical implementation and effectiveness of the textbooks' cultural content. This combination of methods ensured a comprehensive evaluation of the textbooks from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

## **Sample and Sampling**

Convenience sampling was initially employed to select participants for the questionnaire survey, comprising 71 middle school students from Ouhai District, Wenzhou City, who were using Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) teaching materials. The sample included 30 female and 41 male students, spanning Grades 7 to 9. To enhance the representativeness of the sample, a stratified random sampling method was subsequently applied, ensuring proportional representation across different grades and genders. Purposive sampling was employed for the interviews to ensure that the selected participants had substantial experience with the FLTRP textbooks and could provide informed insights into their use and effectiveness. The interview participants comprised four seasoned English teachers, each with an average of nine years of teaching experience.

## **Research Instruments**

The questionnaire was developed to assess students' understanding and perceptions of Western cultural content in the FLTRP textbooks. It consisted of multiple-choice and open-ended questions designed to evaluate students' grasp of cultural elements and their views on the effectiveness of the textbook's design and organization. To ensure reliability, the questionnaire underwent a pilot test with a small sample of students, and necessary adjustments were made based on the feedback. The validity of the questionnaire was established through expert review by three educational researchers specializing in English language teaching and cultural studies.

The questionnaire was designed to assess students' understanding and perceptions of Western cultural content in the FLTRP textbooks. It comprised single-choice, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions, addressing students' basic information (Q1), content cognition and matching (Q2-Q4), skills improvement and development (Q5), and suggestions for textbook improvement (Q6-Q10). Questions Q2-Q6 were rated on a five-point Likert scale: 5=strongly agree, and 1=strongly disagree. To ensure reliability, the questionnaire underwent a pilot test

with a small sample of students, and necessary adjustments were made based on the feedback. The validity of the questionnaire was established through the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity.

The interview questionnaire consisted of five questions divided into two aspects. According to Chen (2021), teachers using the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) theory in junior middle school English teaching can facilitate better and faster student development by shifting traditional teaching concepts. Teachers' understanding of teaching materials significantly impacts the effectiveness of teaching activities (Zhou & Liu, 2023). Therefore, the first aspect focused on teachers' understanding of Western culture in the textbooks and their teaching methods (Q1-Q4), while the second aspect solicited teachers' suggestions (Q5).

### **Data Collection**

The classification of Western cultural content in grades 7-9 of FLTRP textbooks was based on both the content analysis of the FLTRP materials and Vygotsky's theoretical framework, which includes the elements of "current level," "developable level," and "auxiliary support." Additionally, the effectiveness of this classification was evaluated in accordance with these elements.

The questionnaire survey was administered to 71 middle school students from Ou Hai District, Wenzhou City, who use FLTRP teaching materials. The data collection was conducted using the Wenjuanxing platform, a widely used online survey tool in China. Students were given three weeks to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed and completed in a controlled environment, with teachers overseeing the process to ensure that the students understood the questions and responded accurately.

Interviews were conducted with four experienced English teachers. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, private setting to ensure candid responses. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected from the questionnaires, interviews, and content analysis were systematically analyzed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Content analysis was conducted on FLTRP's New Standard English textbooks to evaluate the representation and integration of Western cultural content. This analysis assessed how well the textbooks align with Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" theory, focusing on the adequacy of cultural content as scaffolding for students' cognitive and cultural development.

The collected questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize the students' responses. This quantitative analysis provided insights into the students' comprehension of Western cultural content and their opinions on the textbooks' effectiveness.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and insights from the teachers' perspectives. This qualitative analysis focused on understanding the practical implementation of the textbooks and gathering professional opinions on their cultural content.

## Results

### *Content Analysis of the Textbooks*

An analysis of FLTRP's English textbooks revealed a total of 204 standardized courses, with 95 of these courses containing Western cultural content. The distribution of Western cultural content is as follows: 17 courses in 7A (Book One, Grade Seven), 26 courses in 7B (Book Two, Grade Seven), 21 courses in 8A (Book One, Grade Eight), 15 courses in 8B (Book Two, Grade Eight), 17 courses in 9A (Book One, Grade Nine), and 14 courses in 9B (Book Two, Grade Nine).

According to Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) theory, the ZPD represents the gap between a child's current level of independent problem-solving and the higher level of potential development achievable through guidance or collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, the Western cultural content of grades 7-9 in FLTRP's textbooks was classified and analyzed based on the three elements of the ZPD theory: the current developmental level, the potential developmental level, and the scaffolding required to bridge the gap between the two. The categorization and evaluation of the Western cultural content according to these elements are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Specific Categories of Data Statistics

Elements	Details	
Current level	Checklist	Pre-class activities
Developable level	Repeat theme	Expand and improve
Auxiliary support	Illustration	Reminder box

Table 2: The Distribution of Teaching Materials to Students' Current Level

Element	Details	7A	7B	8A	8B	9A	9B
Current level	Check list	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Pre-class activities	1	2	0	1	0	0

Table 2 reveals that the teaching materials lack a systematic assessment of students' pre-existing knowledge. In terms of pre-class instructional activities, such assessments were conducted only on four occasions. In 7A, a map exercise required students to locate different countries on a map prior to the lesson. In 7B, activities included map-related questions, dialogues, and music playback. In 8B, a contextual scenario was created for a hypothetical trip to Los Angeles.

Table 3: The Distribution of Contents of Students' Developable Level

Element	Details	7A	7B	8A	8B	9A	9B
Developable level	Repeat	0	4	2	1	2	1
	Expand and improve	12	17	22	17	26	13
		10AW, 2exercise s	10AW, 7exercise s	11AW, 11exercis es	8AW, 9exercis e	10AW, 16exercis es	6AW, 7exercis es

Note: AW stands for data cards "around the world" in the Unit 3 of the textbooks.

Table 3 indicates the presence of recurring themes across the textbooks for each grade. In 7A, concepts such as first name, last name, family name, and given name are introduced across two units. In 7B, the life of Shakespeare is covered in Unit 2, with further exploration of Shakespeare's house in Unit 3's "Around the World" (AW) section. Additionally, Unit 3 covers greetings, body language, and etiquette. Western music culture is introduced in Unit 2 with Vienna, the City of Music, and expanded upon with the Vienna New Year Concert in Unit 3's AW. The review module includes characters from literary works, music introductions from various countries, and ways of greeting in different cultures.

In 8A, an entire unit is dedicated to the Western story of Alice in Wonderland, with expanded knowledge of the story's origins presented in AW. Module 11, Unit 1, discusses Chinese and American gift-giving habits, while Unit 3 introduces Western and Greek gift-giving customs in AW. The unit review covers gift-opening practices in different countries. In 8B, Los Angeles is featured in Unit 1 and the Los Angeles Summer Camp in Unit 2.

Similarly, 9A introduces literary works and characters, covering Shakespeare, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, The Adventures of Alex the Knight, and Plato's The Republic, reflecting themes also found in 7B and 8A. Module 10 focuses entirely on Australian culture. In 9B, eating habits are explored in Module 4 exercises, with British and American party and dining customs highlighted in Module 6.

Table 4: The Distribution of Provision of Auxiliary Supports for Students

Element	Details	7A	7B	8A	8B	9A	9B
Auxiliary support	Illustration	8	5	9	7	8	6
		7 AW	5AW	8 AW	7AW	8AW	6AW
	Reminder box	2 1 underlined	0	0	0	0	0

### Results of Student Questionnaires

In this study, 71 questionnaires were distributed to students, and 68 were effectively collected, yielding a response rate of 96%. The questionnaire comprised 10 questions, including students' basic information (Q1), content cognition and matching questions (Q2-Q4), skills improvement and development questions (Q5), and students' suggestions on textbook improvement (Q6-Q10). Questions Q2-Q6 used a five-point Likert scale, where 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neutral, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree.

To evaluate the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha was calculated, resulting in a coefficient of 0.779 for questions Q2-Q7, indicating satisfactory reliability. Validity was assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity, with KMO at 0.628 and Bartlett's significance at 0.000, confirming the validity of the data.

The distribution of students across grades was relatively even, as shown in Table 4-5:

Table 5: Students' Information

Grades	Seven	Eight	Nine
Proportion (%)	26.79	30.36	42.86



This balanced distribution facilitated the analysis of cognitive differences among students in different grades regarding the textbook content.

The responses to questions about the richness, challenge, and helpfulness of the textbook content are summarized in Table 6:

Table 6: Cognition and Matching of Textbook Content and Students

Questions	Options				
	5	4	3	2	1
Q2: Richness of contents	0	42.41	40.69	16.9	0
Q3: Challenging	0	24.14	60.34	15.52	0
Q4: Helpfulness	8.93	73.21	17.86	0	0

Students generally rated the richness of Western cultural content as moderate. The perceived difficulty of the content varied, reflecting different levels of development among students. However, most students found the content helpful in understanding and accepting Western culture.

The impact of the textbooks on students' cross-cultural communication skills is presented in Table 7:

Table 7: Student Skills Improvement and Development Status

Questions	Options				
	5	4	3	2	1
Q5: Improve the ability of cross-cultural communication	7.14	67.86	23.21	1.79	0

The majority of students acknowledged some improvement in their cross-cultural communication skills, though responses varied, indicating different levels of mastery and absorption. Student suggestions for enhancing the textbook content are shown in Tables 8–9:

Table 8: Students' Suggestions for Textbooks

Question	Options				
	5	4	3	2	1
Q6: Content depth	8.93	62.5	28.57	0	0
Q7: Interest	5.36	73.21	16.07	5.56	0

Table 9: Suggestions for Improving the Cultural Content

Contents	Richer content	Historical/ cultural background	Modern elements	Real-life connection	Deeper analysis
Proportion (%)	98.28	53.45	55.17	86.21	50

The majority of students expressed a desire for richer content and stronger connections to real-life experiences, as well as more historical and modern cultural elements. Students' preferences for the presentation of Western culture in textbooks are summarized in Table 10:

Table 10: Suggestions for the Presentation of Western Culture

Contents	Annotation and analysis	Real examples	Practice activities
Proportion (%)	84.48	94.83	20.69

Most students preferred more analysis and real examples, highlighting the demand for depth and authenticity in the textbooks.

The open-ended responses from students offered a variety of suggestions for enhancing the textbook content, which can be categorized into four main areas: content enrichment, engagement and relevance, depth and complexity, and comparative cultural practices.

Students expressed a desire for updating the textbook content by including comparisons to Chinese culture, incorporating more historical knowledge, and diversifying the representation of Western cultural content. This indicates a need for a broader and more varied cultural representation that encompasses multiple perspectives. Enriching the content in these ways can provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of cultural contexts.

Many students emphasized the importance of making learning tasks more engaging and including more real-life cases. They also suggested incorporating interesting cultural information from daily life. These suggestions highlight the need for content that is not only educational but also relatable and engaging. By integrating real-life examples and making tasks more interactive, the textbooks can better capture students' interest and enhance their learning experience.

Additionally, some students called for the inclusion of appropriately challenging texts for more in-depth introductions and analyses of cultural topics. This reflects a demand for more complex material that can foster a deeper understanding of cultural nuances. Including more advanced texts and thorough analyses can help students develop critical thinking skills and a more nuanced appreciation of cultural differences.

### **Results of the Teacher Interviews**

To ensure the validity of the thematic analysis, a rigorous coding process was employed. First, all interview transcripts were carefully transcribed verbatim. The initial coding involved reading through the transcripts multiple times to identify recurring themes and patterns. Two independent researchers coded the data to enhance reliability, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected the main findings of the study. To ensure the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the themes, member checking was conducted, where the teachers reviewed the summarized themes and provided feedback. This iterative process helped refine the themes and ensured that they accurately represented the teachers' perspectives.

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that most teachers emphasized the importance of incorporating Western cultural content in their lessons. They believe that understanding Western culture is crucial for enhancing students' English proficiency and cross-cultural communication skills. To achieve this, teachers frequently supplement textbook content with additional resources such as pictures, videos, and role-playing activities. These methods help students gain a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances behind the English language, thereby increasing their interest and enthusiasm for learning.

The analysis indicated variability in how Western cultural content is addressed across different grade levels. Seventh-grade teachers often expand on the Western cultural content presented in the "Around the World" (AW) sections, with advanced students encouraged to read related literature after class. In contrast, ninth-grade teachers, facing time constraints and

exam pressures, tend to focus less on Western cultural content, particularly in the AW sections. Sometimes, they even instruct students to study this material independently after class.

Teachers suggested that the curriculum should place greater emphasis on cultural diversity and inclusiveness, encompassing a broader range of Western countries and cultural phenomena. They also recommended incorporating cultural content that is closely related to students' real-life experiences to better engage their interest and enthusiasm.

In summary, the thematic analysis highlights the teachers' recognition of the importance of Western cultural content in the textbooks and their efforts to enhance this content through supplementary materials and varied teaching methods. However, it also points to the need for curricular adjustments to better support diverse cultural education and to accommodate the practical constraints faced by teachers at different grade levels. These insights align with the broader goal of improving the cultural depth and engagement of English language education.

## **Discussion**

The data collection revealed that the representation of Western cultural content is relatively consistent across all grades in the FLTRP English textbooks, with a substantial proportion dedicated to Western culture in junior middle school. However, an analysis of the textbooks indicated a lack of assessments to gauge students' current levels of understanding. For example, the FLTRP textbooks do not include self-test sheets, and pre-class guidance is minimal, appearing only four times throughout the series. Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the current developmental level of students. Questionnaire statistics show that students' perceptions of the difficulty of Western cultural content vary widely, though most are concentrated at a medium level. This variance likely reflects the differing ZPDs among students. To address this, teachers need to more accurately assess students' learning levels and incorporate targeted pre-class guidance. Textbook writers should also consider integrating more preparatory content, which can serve as both a reinforcement for advanced students and a support for those who struggle.

Promoting students' developmental levels requires effective teaching that goes beyond their existing level of development and actively fosters their potential (Miao, 2021). The textbooks exhibit repeated cultural themes, which aid in gradually deepening students' cultural understanding. For instance, British and American gift customs are introduced in Grade 7 and revisited with Chinese and American gift-giving traditions in Grade 8. This progressive knowledge development helps students gain a more comprehensive understanding of cultural practices. Additionally, within individual units, there are overlaps and expansions of cultural content. For example, Grade 7 covers the distinctions between first names and last names, which are then elaborated upon in subsequent sections. Similar expansions are seen with topics such as Shakespeare's life and Vienna's music culture, where initial introductions are deepened through supplementary content in the "Around the World" (AW) sections and review modules.

Pre-class tasks serve as scaffolding for classroom learning, significantly impacting the effectiveness of cultural education (He, 2023). Some units effectively use pre-class tasks to set the stage for deeper cultural understanding. For example, in Grade 8's "Summer in Los Angeles," pre-class activities help students prepare for an immersive cultural experience.

Music and dialogue exercises in Grade 7 introduce students to Western music culture, enhancing their appreciation through a comparative lens with Chinese drama. These scaffolded activities activate students' prior knowledge and help teachers identify their ZPDs, enabling more tailored instruction (Lu & Kang, 2008).

Despite these strengths, there are areas for improvement in the design and presentation of Western cultural content. Most cultural information is presented directly, often in the AW sections, which, while helpful for initial understanding, do not always encourage deeper engagement. Interviews with students revealed that many find this approach too straightforward, leading to a lack of challenge and interest. A significant proportion of students noted that much of the textbook content focuses on Chinese culture, with Western cultural content often being less prominent. This suggests a need for more explicit marking of Western cultural content and greater emphasis in classroom instruction.

Some cultural points are integrated into dialogues, emails, and diaries, and are reinforced through exercises like fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice questions. While these methods help consolidate students' memory of cultural points, many students reported that these exercises were not sufficiently challenging or interesting. The focus on accuracy in answering questions often leads to a neglect of the cultural content itself, reducing the effectiveness of cultural education.

Based on the findings from internal theoretical research and external practical research, the following suggestions are proposed for enhancing the Western cultural content in the textbooks:

First, there is a clear need for more robust assessment mechanisms in the textbooks. Analyzing the development status of junior high school students is conducive to improving their learning efficiency (Chen, 2021). This could include self-assessment links and chapter summary evaluations. Regular tests and consolidation activities should be included to monitor students' progress and reinforce key content. The current textbooks lack such features, which are essential for helping students consolidate their learning and for teachers to gauge their understanding accurately.

Second, the cultural content in the textbooks should be deepened. While the content is broad, it often lacks depth. Textbooks should constantly create new thinking “ZPDs” to promote students' continual intellectual growth, thereby elevating their cognitive development (Zeng, 2011). Incorporating more detailed cultural and historical knowledge, including idiomatic expressions and colloquial language, would enhance students' understanding. For example, the textbooks rarely cover English idioms and legends, such as “Do as the Romans do.” Additionally, the cultural focus is predominantly on British and American contexts. Expanding this to include more diverse cultures would broaden students' cultural horizons.

Third, the presentation of Western culture can be optimized by incorporating more interactive and engaging activities. Ying and Xu (2001) demonstrated that interest and knowledge are fundamental attributes that educational materials should possess. Games, thematic units, and situational role-plays can make learning more interesting and challenging. Including real-life cultural materials and experiences will make the content more relatable and engaging for students (Ying & Xu, 2001).

Fourth, there is a need to increase auxiliary support for Western culture learning. Currently, cultural illustrations are mostly confined to the AW sections, with limited reminders of cultural priorities. Related topics could be linked to multimedia resources, including videos and audio content, which can transform and reorganize students' cognitive structures to facilitate the construction of new knowledge (Duan, 2016). Adding more visual aids, QR codes for video content, and performance activities can significantly enhance students' grasp of Western culture. These supports will make cultural learning more accessible and engaging, helping students to better internalize the content.

By addressing these areas, the FLTRP English textbooks can better support students' cultural learning and development, providing a richer, more engaging educational experience.

## **Conclusion**

This study examines the impact of the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) theory on FLTRP teaching materials through an analysis of textbook content and investigations involving both students and teachers. The findings reaffirm FLTRP's longstanding significance in Chinese education while also identifying areas for improvement. By establishing a textbook evaluation framework based on ZPD theory, this study aims to provide valuable references for middle school English teachers and textbook researchers, particularly in the context of teaching and designing Western cultural content. This framework is intended to lay a solid foundation for fostering cultural awareness among middle school students.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the classification standards for cultural content may be influenced by personal subjective factors, which can affect the authority and comprehensiveness of the findings. Second, the research sample is limited to students and teachers in the Wenzhou area, restricting the generalizability of the results. Third, as highlighted in the literature review, there are limited studies combining ZPD theory and Western cultural content in teaching materials, resulting in a lack of extensive academic references for this research.

Despite these limitations, the forthcoming publication of a new edition of the FLTRP textbook may address some of the suggestions made in this study and potentially offer additional insights. Future research should aim to verify these findings with different subject groups and under more rigorous research conditions, striving to achieve a coordinated development of teaching materials and student cognition.

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**Contact email:** [jessica212j@outlook.com](mailto:jessica212j@outlook.com)

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Questionnaires for Students

An Investigation on the Effectiveness of Western Culture Arrangement in Junior High School Textbooks Based on the Theory of “Zone of Proximal Development”

Dear students,

We are conducting a research on the content of Western culture in FLTRP junior high school textbooks. Please take about 3 minutes to help fill out this questionnaire. This questionnaire is anonymous, all data is only statistical analysis, please fill in according to the real idea, there is no right or wrong. We promise to keep your information strictly confidential.

1. What grade are you in now? [single-choice]\*

- Grade Seven
- Grade Eight
- Grade Nine

2. Do you think the current English textbooks are rich enough about Western culture? [single-choice]\*

Strongly agree	<input type="radio"/>	5	<input type="radio"/>	4	<input type="radio"/>	3	<input type="radio"/>	2	<input type="radio"/>	1	Strongly disagree
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3. Do you think the Western cultural content of textbooks is challenging for you? [single-choice]\*

Strongly agree	<input type="radio"/>	5	<input type="radio"/>	4	<input type="radio"/>	3	<input type="radio"/>	2	<input type="radio"/>	1	Strongly disagree
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4. Do you think the content about Western culture in the textbook is helpful for you to understand and accept Western culture? [single-choice]\*

Strongly agree	<input type="radio"/>	5	<input type="radio"/>	4	<input type="radio"/>	3	<input type="radio"/>	2	<input type="radio"/>	1	Strongly disagree
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5. Do you think your cross-cultural communication ability has improved after learning the textbook? [single-choice]\*

Strongly agree	<input type="radio"/>	5	<input type="radio"/>	4	<input type="radio"/>	3	<input type="radio"/>	2	<input type="radio"/>	1	Strongly disagree
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6. Do you think the Western culture content in the textbook should pay more attention to its historical background and in-depth analysis of social culture? [single-choice]\*

Strongly agree	<input type="radio"/>	5	<input type="radio"/>	4	<input type="radio"/>	3	<input type="radio"/>	2	<input type="radio"/>	1	Strongly disagree
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7. Do you think the Western cultural content in the textbook helps you develop a deeper interest in English language and culture? [single-choice]\*

Strongly agree	<input type="radio"/>	5	<input type="radio"/>	4	<input type="radio"/>	3	<input type="radio"/>	2	<input type="radio"/>	1	Strongly disagree
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8. In your opinion, what aspects of Western culture content in English textbooks should be improved or strengthened? [multiple-choice] \*

- Make the content more rich and diverse
- Pay more attention to historical and cultural background
- Introduce more modern elements
- Strengthen the connection to real life
- In-depth analysis of cultural phenomena and values
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

9. How do you think the content of Western culture in English textbooks should be improved to better help you learn? [multiple-choice] \*

- Add more explanations and comments



- Provide more practical examples
- Offer more exercises and activities
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

10. Do you have any suggestions or opinions about Western culture in English textbooks?  
[open-ended questions] \*

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***Appendix B: Contents of Teachers' Interview***

1. Will you consciously explain the content of Western culture in class?
2. What is the relationship between your teaching of Western culture and the teaching materials?
3. Is the arrangement of Western cultural content in English books conducive to your teaching of Western cultural content?
4. How do you teach Western culture? Will it incorporate the "zone of proximal development theory"?
5. Do you have any suggestions on the arrangement of Western cultural content in the textbook?