

# Mapping Cognition, Mapping Pedagogy: Integrating Chinese EFL Learners' Critical Thinking Skills into the Exploration of Cultural Identity

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**Abstract:** As language and culture are two inseparable and homologous entities, foreign language teaching has gradually evolved into a cultural teaching to meet the goal of cultivating more internationalized talents in the globalized era. The interconnectedness of language and culture necessitates cultural components in EFL setting to maximize students' exploration of target language. It has spurred several attempts to a paradigm shift from the grammar-oriented or vocabulary-based instruction to a culturally sustaining pedagogy in undergraduate second language education. However, most of the pedagogical practices have merely skimmed the surface of culture-related content in English textbooks and omit the experiential learning mode, let alone integrating the cultivation of learners' critical thinking skills with intercultural competence. In attempt to propose a praxis for intercultural education through the EFL lens, this paper probes into cultural inquiry within the percepts of cognitive mapping and Kolb's experiential learning cycle, which serves to resolve thorny learning-related issues in the intercultural context. Grounded in the real-life pedagogical scenarios of analyzing "cultural identity" in literature and culture course of Guangzhou Huashang college, it also functions as a practical methodology through which English major students' cognitive abilities, critical thinking skills and intercultural competence could be fostered. To some extent, the incorporation of enhancing knowledge, skills, and abilities in a cross-cultural setting is the magic key that unlocks the door to enable EFL learners to attain all-round development.

**Keywords:** intercultural education; cognitive mapping; the experiential learning cycle; intercultural competence; critical thinking

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As the globalized era has gradually given way to intercultural education in English language teaching, it requires language learners to sustainably synthesize adequate intercultural competence and critical thinking skills to tackle complicated contextual issues and establish successful social relations across the world (Lovrović & Kolega, 2021). Nevertheless, as the contemporary English language curricula may be deemed as the explicit framing and a key token of ways in which the significance of fostering cultural awareness is underscored, most of culture-based courses have traditionally been reduced to direct teaching and rote learning of linguistic skills. For instance, when scholars and educators define literature and culture course at the undergraduate level, it is still being predominated by relatively out-of-date guidelines and methodology, namely, vocabulary-centeredness, grammar-centeredness, and examination-orientation. In this case, little seems to happen in a Chinese EFL classroom integrating culture acquisition to authentic situations or experiential learning mode. This mismatch between pedagogical orientation and practices makes evident the ongoing failure to facilitate intercultural competence and critical thinking skills of students, who often have high test scores but low abilities. That is to say, characterized by the prevalent and rigid grammar-vocabulary practices and sentence-to-sentence textual exercises, the traditional teaching mode is far from adequately verifying the intended effectiveness in intercultural teaching for Chinese higher education, with almost no thorough implementation of experimentation and application.

Frequently discouraged by rote memorization and tightly-scripted lessons for culture-related courses, this paper sheds light upon the strategic significance of intercultural education and underlines that language acquisition and interculturality entail an experiential approach oriented towards fostering intercultural competence and critical thinking skills. Formerly, the cultivation of linguistic skills, intercultural competence and critical thinking ability were generally rendered as discrete and disjointed. But in practice, the Chinese university curriculum, such as “literature and culture course”, could conduce to the making of “patchwork” for multi-layered targets and goals stitched together to achieve greater accomplishments in the exploration of cultural terms and competence development for tertiary education (Thuneberg et al., 2017).

## **2. A COGNITIVE FRAMEWORK OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION**

Reflecting on prior pedagogical practices, EFL teachers have come to realize that one of the everlasting concerns of intercultural education is to re-examine and improve teaching materials to meet the actual needs of their students for competence development. To provide a holistic view of cultural phenomena, the inclusion of “third-world” literature also plays the pivotal role in shaping of a cognitive framework of intercultural education. The integration of culture in language teaching is based on the assumption that culture cannot be explored without literature; that is to say, literature is the medium of culture and they are interrelated for the EFL classroom (Kramsch, 1998; Sellami, 2000). However, due to misconceptions about “world literature” among EFL educators and decision makers, the first-world literature, consciously or unconsciously, solely defines and dominates the curriculum. Thus, fiction, poems and literature from other societies have long been marginalized and less appreciated. For instance, in light of Jameson’s theory on cultural logic and historical periodization, the third-world literature, serves as the destructive force to break down the chains of long-term monopoly of Western culture, creates a network of multicultural spaces for people dominated by the values and stereotypes of a first-world culture (Jameson, 1986). In this case, inquiry to the third-world literature in language teaching sketches an unbiased conception of the cognitive aesthetics of mapping cultural diversity and functions as an arguably instructional and effective tool for learners to enhance intercultural competence and critical thinking skills.

Apart from unleashing the underestimated value and potential of third-world literature, it is ripe time for scholars and educators to reconsider the incongruity between prescribed and actual use of selected texts in EFL classrooms and remove the discrepancy between students’ learning outcome and teachers’ pedagogical goals. When analyzing a series of cultural terms embedded in literary text in a traditional educational setting, the EFL learners are no more than passive listeners or inefficient note-takers, which exposes the lack of learners’ engagement and critical thinking skills. Moreover, the common culture-related practices are only tangentially touched upon in the textual level, especially in vocabulary and grammar acquisition. And it is also interesting to observe that most of cultural activities in class are limited and impractical: all the discussions about cultural differences, cultural events, negative stereotypes and culture shock are based on fictional or out-of-date cases in textbooks, which never updates with time or fulfills learners’ actual needs. In response to the tension between the goal of authenticity and the scripted curriculum, this paper applies a much needed critical perspective to foster learners’ intercultural competence and its derivatives with a thorough investigation of the underpinning philosophies, thoughts, terms and assumptions that they would not have noticed before (Shepherd, 2019).

As intercultural education is apt to take great advantage from the implementation of experiential learning and case-based learning activities, the authentic scenarios for integrated pedagogical practices in the following chapter are closely relevant to didactics designed for undergraduate students in China’s EFL classroom.

## **3. AN EXPERIENTIAL PRAXIS IN THE EXPLORATION OF CULTURE**

Grounded on the experiential learning model, the cognitive approach to intercultural teaching offered here is chiefly based on the authentic situations and hands-on practices. To assist learners to acquire a more ostensive, tangible view on the exploration of culture in China’s EFL setting, the author chooses a case of literature and culture course which she has undertaken for English major students in Guangzhou Huashang College as an exemplification. Guided by the implementation of the “going-

out" national policy and the competence development for "internationalized" talents, this course has carried out via multiple-perspective analysis of cultural phenomena and critical understanding of cultural manifestations in third-world literary texts. And the following pedagogical case is directed at facilitating learners to explore the connotation of "cultural identity" embodied in Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use", which centers on the alienated Black female life.

After the teacher's redesigning of pedagogy plans, the whole teaching procedure, revolving around "cultural identity", could be divided into three principal parts successively: the pre-class self-learning about recognition of "cultural identity" in "Everyday Use"; the in-class analysis and discussion of different symbols and signifiers of "cultural identity" in "Everyday Use"; and the post-class follow-up reflection on the investigation and assessment of intercultural competence.

### **3.1. Name as Signifier of Cultural Identity: the Exploration of Cultural Awareness**

During the pre-class phase, the teacher generally conducted an online research-based open-ended questionnaire about English major students' existing knowledge and understanding about "cultural identity", which required every learner to accomplish all the exercises before class. Then, according to the feedback and results, she would redesign her own pedagogy to closer meet the actual learning needs of students. In this way, students were encouraged to connect their learning and culture acquisition with the empirical world beyond the classroom. From the feedback, most students were ambiguous about the connotation of cultural identity even though they had an access to Wikipedia to look into its definition, which even confined their way of thinking. It is interesting to note that one of the students thought out of the box and made associations between her experience and the term itself. Once mentioning in the questionnaire, she regarded cultural identity as the generalization of her dialect Hakka, which is unique to a certain cultural group. In view of her feedback, the student successfully achieved her effective self-learning, which is grounded in reflective observation and concrete experience (Kolb, 1984). And then, combining students' empirical knowledge and personal actual experience on analyzing "Everyday Use", the teacher strengthened her students' abstract conceptualizations and motivated their interests in undiscovered aspects of the connotations of the literary text. For example, the teacher outlined that suffering from racial discrimination, gender and class conflicts, most Afro-American women were haunted by the "double consciousness" in their pursuit of identity: they were both marginalized at the edge of the mainstream culture in American society and obscured to look for their own way to regain African heritage. Confronted with the harsh realities of racial inequalities, Alice Walker, who is also part of Afro-American women, gives a voice for her community and implicitly unrolls the immense panorama of social history by portraying the vicissitudes of female life in identity predicament and subjectivity reconstruction.

Also noteworthy, the teacher advocated to take Black Power Movement into account before elucidating the blurred cultural identity of female characters. The outburst of Black Power Movement rekindled consciousness about inheriting from cultural traditions and canons. Mama and her daughters, Dee and Maggie, whom Alice Walker (1973) depicts vividly in "Everyday Use", epitomize the social status of African American women at that time. From the students' feedback before class, Dee is the most impressive female character in the short story, who is portrayed as overwhelmingly attractive and bright. Totally different from Mama, who cannot imagine "looking a strange white man in the eye", Dee "would always look anyone in the eye" boldly and fearlessly and it comes no surprise to find that "[h]esitation was no part of her nature" (Walker, 1973). In a nutshell, Dee would never lower her eyes under the gaze of the white people and dares to show off her glamour anytime in the white-dominant society. During group discussion, students expounded on the unconventionality of Dee mainly at the textual level: unlike most of traditional black women who are passive and docile, Dee seems to be flamboyant and glamorous with the incarnation as "light than Maggie, with nicer hair and fuller finger" (Walker, 1973). But the contextual analysis of Dee's image is neglected by students, which discloses their inadequate understanding of different cultural contexts. Then, after the teacher's guided instruction through cueing, prompting and questioning, students came to realize the ubiquitous racial oppression on black women and interpreted "light" skin as the implication of racial superiority and global white supremacy. According to the teacher's pedagogical endeavors, students were more culturally sensitive and inclined to recognize and analyze context-based and culture-loaded words, which further explains the importance of cultural sensitivity and intelligence in teaching EFL students.

In addition to her distinctive appearance and personality, it is also worth noting Dee's frantic but mistaken adoption of an African name, "Wangero", which baffles nearly all the students. Likewise, through in-class activities, such as free discussion and reflective observation, the teacher elicited students' ideas and thoughts on the interrelationship between naming and identity. More specifically, to nurture students' cultural empathy, the teacher encouraged students to share their own stories behind their names to gather concrete experiences as the foundation of the experiential learning model. Based on students' free discussion, they found that regardless of naming conventions varying in different regions and areas, bestowing or adopting names all have significant meanings and stand as a fingerprint of an individual's cultural identity. Taking a common given name "Mei" for Chinese girls as example, one of the students presented that "Mei" is wintersweet translated into Chinese, which embodies parental expectations and wishes. As it is endowed with purity and tenacity in China, lots of Chinese believe this name can steer their offspring towards well-being, virtue or luckiness. It is also interesting to note that a sense of embeddedness within an ethnic family or kin network can well be unveiled by surnames, so parental decisions to deeply root the child within a particular cultural background through consciously choosing first names is a further manifestation of intergenerational maintenance of their cultural legacy and tradition. That is to say, strongly encoded with gender, birthplace, ethnicity, religion, traditions and expectations, names are generally perceived as the markers of cultural identity and a way of keeping the cultural heritage alive to generations to come.

Combined with the contextual analysis, students were gradually aware that Dee's impulsive decision to change her name as a weird African name "Wangero" is attributed to her superficial understanding about African traditional culture. After searching for the socio-historical context concerning "Everyday Use", students discovered that with Black Power Movement in the 1970s surging forward, African American people were largely pushed to highlight political and cultural demands to achieve self-determination for African descendants. One method is to seek their root in African cultural traditions, which evoked a number of activists to resume their lost black cultural identity venturously, even blindly. Needless to say, fashion-pursuing Dee is also a representative from the root-seeking deluge. On her arrival home, Dee announces with pride that she has changed her original name to a native African name "Wangero", by which she considers herself having fulfilled inheriting from their African traditions. But Dee's way of promoting traditional African culture was disputed by some students, who critically thought of the matter and consulted the relevant referential materials. Then, they found that "Wangero and Kemanjo are misspellings of the Kikuyu names ' Wanjiro ' and ' Kamenjo '", which testifies Dee's blind impulse to change her name without thorough and scrupulous consideration of cultural inheritance (qtd. in White, 2002).

More ironically, Dee even has no idea about the reason why she was named after her aunt Dicie, grandmother Dee and even earlier ancestors. In "Everyday Use", the maintenance of naming tradition is vital to African-American culture, particularly among those groups who have suffered from colonization, not merely serving as a key factor of remembrance and deep emotions to memorize family members and forge family unity, and also an indispensable carrier of cultural inheritance for the whole nation. That is what black community, especially African American people who are away from their hometown in Africa, have never ceased grasping, preserving and inheriting.

Nevertheless, when Mama cautiously traces their family naming tradition as far back as she could, Dee "[...] sent eye signals [...]" with her boyfriend and deems it as not worthy of serious consideration (Walker, 1973). With regard to Dee's absent-mindedness, students argued that together with her inappropriate adoption of an African name, Dee's indifference reveals her least cherishment and respect for their African traditional culture. Thus, after active engagement in group discussion and critical analysis at a deeper level, students arrived at a conclusion that Dee seems to turn a blind eye to her own family's tradition passed down from generation to generation. Besides, some students pointed that Dee's pursuit of the traditional black culture is more like an impetuous behavior triggered by herd effect, which is far from accomplishing the tasks to rectify the distorted conception of African traditional culture in the white-supremacist American society (Altobai, 2020). And in her eyes, African traditional culture is regarded as an outward fashion other than basic necessity. With the implementation of the case-based experiential learning model, students were eager to clarify cultural terms in authentic situations and more involved in digging into critical contextual analysis of selected culture-related literary texts, which enables them to possess a strengthened sense of cultural awareness, sensitivity and competence.

### **3.2. "Quilts" as Symbol of Cultural Identity: the Exploration of Cultural Inheritance**

In addition to "name", another typical example of decoding cultural identity is "quilt". Before an in-depth analysis of the inheritance of quilts, students were ready to gather all-round contextual information that is relevant to case study and they were aware that the quilt itself has drifted away from being specifically tied to an exclusively female cultural domain. Rather, as students elaborated, the significance of quilts was underestimated since they were more like a central metaphor and universal sign of American cultural identity" (qtd. in Whitsitt, 2000). As a signifier of unity and wisdom of African-American women, quilts are undeniably appreciated and valued by the two sisters, which dramatically pushed them to contend for one of the quilts.

The eagerness of Maggie and Dee to their traditional culture, seemingly similar, but are evidently different, especially in craving for quilts. Much less controversial than her attention-getting and bold sister Dee, Maggie is characterized as a traditional Afro-American woman. Once Mama recognizes that her little daughter knows clearly her own limitations and "she knows she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passed her by" (Walker, 1973). Moreover, Maggie's lack of self-confidence is also manifested in walking "like a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough [...]" (Walker, 1973). Based on the textual analysis, students were given a picture of Maggie as a thin and awkward girl, whose "chin on chest, eyes on the ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground" (Walker, 1973). Then, students further interpreted that the fire not only left irrecoverable physical scars to Maggie, but also served as a ghostly nightmare and traumatic experience haunting her mentally. In this regard, most of students showed their sympathy for miserable fate of Maggie. Nevertheless, accustomed to be passive and oppressed, Maggie, habituated to a disadvantaged status all her life, expresses her unwillingness to collide with her sister for the quilts.

The vivid portrayal of the two sisters' contradiction triggered students' interest and develops an interconnected interpretation of characterization and context. According to students' meticulous observation and comparative analysis, they discovered that even though Maggie is apparently overshadowed by her sister nearly in any aspect, she still outweighs Dee with a great grasp of an admirably deeper understanding about black culture legacy and inheritance. Concerning students' response and feedback before class, the teacher found that Maggie's reluctance in striving for quilts is rather demanding to comprehend. In this regard, some students were also critical of Maggie's passivity and contended that her inaction in the fierce argument with Dee was incompatible with her identity as the upholder of Afro-American cultural traditions. Further instructed and guided by the teacher, students were inclined to penetrate into innate personality and beliefs of Maggie. In fact, for Maggie, it is her grasp of the essence of cultural inheritance that matters, not the quilt itself. Different from Dee, she values and cherishes the family quilts for their sentiment, connoted family unity and practical usefulness. Moreover, some students also noticed that Maggie acquired quilting skills from her grandmother and aunt and regarding the quilts as a reminder of her grandmother and aunt, she insisted, "I can 'member' them without the quilts" (Walker, 1973). In view of this, students were deeply moved by the moment that Maggie's zeal to protect native culture is sublimed and the African Americans' collective consciousness is elevated. Maggie, as an epitome of innumerable Afro-American women, aspires to win the everlasting battle against racial discrimination, gender oppression, injustice, and identity confusion.

Via comparative analysis, students came to uncover Dee's attitude towards quilts. It is highlighted that Dee "claims" to value the family quilts (Coward, 1996). The value of quilts in her eyes, however, lies in appreciation as priceless artworks from a distance. More ironically, before going to college, the quilts were worthless and outdated to her. But now she abruptly seizes an apperception of importance of quilts and changes her mind, urges to possess the quilts for decoration in her room. Meanwhile, Dee believes that she could appreciate the materialistic value of the quilts more than Maggie, who will "be backward enough to put them to everyday use" (Walker, 1973). Ironically, the truth is that by meaningful cultural inheritance, one should stick to using as frequently as possible for fulfillment of its value other than treating it as an artwork on display. Through case-based analysis, students were fully aware that it was never an easy task to reconstruct cultural identities of African-Americans, which cannot be separated from courageous response to slavery and racism. Even in the contemporary

era, the elimination of racial discrimination and self-realization of their cultural identity still waited more time and efforts to achieve. Some students pointed out that no matter how many difficulties and obstacles those Afro-Americans would confront with, they should keep in mind to put cultural inheritance into “everyday use”, “go out” from confined environment and serve as an active player in transmission of traditional culture to a wider range. Meanwhile, other students insisted that another valuable lesson learnt from Afro-American’s cultural inheritance was reflection on the preservation and transmission of Chinese traditional culture. It could serve as a wake-up call for young adults to embrace and inherit time-honored Chinese tradition unswervingly in the new age. That is to say, students were engrossed in authentic materials and situations to gain cultural empathy and critical thinking skills, which laid a solid foundation for intercultural education and competence development. More noteworthy, enlightened by Maggie’s story, they also stressed the importance of inheritance and transmission of Chinese traditional culture.

After the overall case-based activities, students are assigned to hand in a report on cultural identity or a feedback about the course, including the assessment of in-class performance via self-examination and peer evaluation. In doing so, teacher could have an easier access to drawing upon students’ own funds of knowledge and self-efficacy into the mid-class discourse, and then to forming into a learning community.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In light of Kolb’s case-based experiential learning model combined with multiculturalist cognitive mapping for Chinese EFL undergraduate students, this paper throws light upon the effective pedagogical practices in culture-related curriculum in an effort to rekindle English major students’ academic interests and boost their self-efficacy. Targeted at facilitating EFL learners’ intercultural competence and critical thinking skills, this paper also makes third-world literary texts notably versatile for teaching purposes in China’s tertiary education. Within an integrated cognitive framework utilizing authentic culture-loaded materials, the learners’ academic motivation and cultural awareness have been greatly fostered and enhanced after the course. By explicating diverse cognitive strategies, students come to realize that culture is not “taught” or “monopolized”, but “learnt” and “diversified”. In the far-reaching examination of culture-related texts, understanding of cultural terms takes both a much broader and more nuanced lens encompassing cultural diversity, multiculturalism and decentralization of cultural imperialism. As the foundation of intercultural education, equal attention should be given to scrutinize third-world literary materials, which embeds a global and intercultural outlook in EFL teaching. Only by immersive cross-cultural experiences, one could bridge the cognitive gap between his native culture and target culture. With the skillful manipulation of efficient pedagogical strategies, the critical analysis of cultural identity and other cultural terms, not idle words lingering on outdated textbooks any longer, enables students to enhance their cultural empathy, cultural intelligence and critical thinking skills. More noteworthy, the active promotion of cultural engagement in class not only gives students opportunities to connect with language and culture, and also enlightens them to take the initiative in inheriting and transmitting Chinese traditional culture, which strengthens students’ cultural identity and self-confidence. In a nutshell, it is further proposed that teachers integrate the experiential learning model and cognitive strategies to EFL teaching that are comprehensible and appropriate to students, which highlights that the synergy between cognition and experience has a huge potential to unlock how intercultural education provide affordances and magic to all learners for talent internationalization.

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## Mapping Cognition, Mapping Pedagogy: Integrating Chinese EFL Learners' Critical Thinking Skills into the Exploration of Cultural Identity

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