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BRIDGING LANGUAGE AND HERITAGE: PEDAGOGICAL PATHWAYS FOR EMBEDDING TCC IN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSES

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Abstract:

Under the current curriculum reform in China, there is a requirement to bring more elements concerning traditional Chinese culture into English lessons so that students may develop greater confidence in their own culture and eventually acquire better intercultural competence. Nevertheless, some practical problems remain unsolved in certain inland regions such as Ganzhou. Based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Byram's ICC Model, this study attempts to establish the framework of Reflexive ICC and further explore practicable approaches to developing students' TCC competence for exam-oriented senior-high-school learners at the Grade-One stage. Drawing on DDR methodology, this research carried out qualitative needs analysis, implemented Fuzzy-Delphi expert validation, and conducted a classroom pilot in Ganzhou, whereby a three-tier progressive TCC framework covering material, institutional, and spiritual culture was constructed. Pilot results, derived from graded PBL task outputs as well as student survey responses regarding shifts in their cultural identity perceptions and ICC capacities, were generally encouraging. Teacher assessments of test-related task performance indicated no observable decline in learners' relevant language abilities. It is therefore concluded that such multi-path approaches can provide context-sensitive instructional support for exam-oriented inland senior-high EFL settings, though further multi-site empirical evidence is required before these approaches can be widely adopted elsewhere.

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Keyword:

Design And Development Research (DDR); Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM); Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC); Pedagogical Integration Pathways; Senior High English; Traditional Chinese Culture (TCC)



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Introduction

Global and National Curriculum Background

In the context of global English language education, teaching priorities have shifted toward intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Language and culture are inseparable in second language acquisition (Brown, 2014). China's revised senior high English curriculum explicitly mandates embedding Traditional Chinese Culture (TCC) to cultivate cultural confidence and equip students to narrate Chinese stories in English (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020; Wang & Mei, 2019). Such official guidelines push for local cultural materials in regular EFL lessons, breaking from past teaching practices that cantered heavily on Western cultural perspectives. Nevertheless, despite such enthusiastic encouragement at upper levels, satisfactory practical implementation is still lacking across the country.

Research Gap: Limitations of Existing TCC Teaching Research

There is still much more for scholars to understand regarding how TCC operates among Chinese senior-high EFL learners today. In fact, most existing reports on intercultural oriented instruction take Byram's (1997) directional framework too literally. Hence, they merely concern themselves with explaining unfamiliar customs from other cultural contexts yet hardly ever consider what teenage learners can articulate about their own native traditions (Lu & Zhang, 2024). Fewer investigators attempt to revise this competence construct to account for local learners' native-cultural expression.

Further evidence can be drawn from existing textbooks and curricula: currently available TCC-related teaching resources remain fragmented; few learning materials offer clear progression from concrete cultural elements to intangible spiritual connotations, and hardly any specify what lessons should be delivered at each stage (Wang & Liu, 2023); many proposed activities struggle to fit the pressures of high-stakes examinations; thus, they never become commonplace when teachers plan lessons around examination-driven demands (Liang et al., 2025).

Empirical evidence focusing on inland local cities such as Ganzhou remains particularly limited. Though Hakka areas possess abundant distinctive cultural assets, specialised EFL teaching resources for these contexts are still insufficiently backed by empirical studies (Tian & Shi, 2025). Few validated teaching modules built around the DDR framework are available for Grade-One senior-high classrooms in Ganzhou.

Although much Hakka heritage and many sites relating to revolution can indeed be found locally, few opportunities arise for using them during normal foreign language classes (Tian & Shi, 2025). Few authors pay attention to both problems just mentioned while preparing graded readers according to curriculum standards. Among existing works dealing with TCC-oriented language instruction, there appear to be no plans worth implementing because none pays enough attention simultaneously to the three aspects listed earlier. All these complications await further study based on actual experience gathered later.

Localized Dilemmas in Ganzhou Senior High Schools

Nevertheless, a notable policy practice gap persists nationwide. This dilemma is particularly evident in inland regional cities such as Ganzhou. As a home to Hakka culture and revolutionary heritage, Ganzhou has rich local cultural resources but lacks adequate EFL teaching support. Gaokao exerts a strong washback effect on everyday classroom instruction (Bailey, 1999). Consequently, TCC content is reduced to scattered textbook supplements without systematic organisation (Lu & Zhang, 2024).

Front line Grade 1 English teachers in Ganzhou face dual institutional and cognitive obstacles. In another piece by the present author drawing on an earlier local needs survey of these teachers, many practitioners were found to be inadequately resourced: they lacked access to graded, exam-aligned teaching materials covering traditional Chinese civilization as well as local Hakka culture and revolutionary heritage. They also lacked feasible approaches for explaining difficult subject-specific points in English, not to mention the limited weekly time after six-day teaching schedules to develop such lesson resources on their own. Hence arose practical difficulties captured in semi-focused interview surveys designed following Merriam (2002) and Patton (2014); hence emerged recurrent themes identified through data coding using Miles and Huberman's (1994) analytical scheme, in preparation for separate publications focusing exclusively on local schools.

Some constraints will inevitably persist when implementing such instructional adjustments within school settings. Taking Year 1 senior-high classrooms in Ganzhou as an example, relevant curriculum documents (Bowen, 2009; Richey & Klein, 2007) together with commonly-used teaching materials among local teachers suggest that certain adaptations must be made to fit contextual realities. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory is integrated alongside Byram's intercultural communicative competence theory (Byram, 1997; Byram, 2020). Within the framework of design-based development research, successive procedural stages take shape. Equal consideration meanwhile needs to be given to both linguistic skill development and multi-faceted cultural learning, including the indigenous cultural heritage of Ganzhou.

It is thus different from another report devoted entirely to needs analysis. Based on some initial qualitative findings about what many educators actually lack professional competence in and how current teaching materials fail everywhere in Ganzhou itself; this article consists of two more parts. One is fuzzy-Delphi-based expert verification; the other involves field trials carried

out naturally in several secondary schools situated locally. With regard to their respective methods of fuzzy synthesis calculation, they refer respectively to Chang's (1996) method and certain steps contained therein. Of course, these are also based partly upon developments made later by others. There will never appear any duplication concerning their objects under investigation nor anything related thereto.

Research Questions

This DDR based study sets out three interconnected research questions. These questions are informed by national curriculum policy and the practical classroom constraints in Ganzhou.

1. What barriers prevent systematic TCC instruction among Grade 1 English teachers in Ganzhou senior high schools?
2. How can Vygotsky's SCT and Byram's ICC framework be integrated to develop localized TCC teaching pathways?
3. What practical pedagogical pathways can balance TCC cultivation and Gaokao oriented language training?

Theoretical Framework

There will be two theories underlying the whole set of instructions related to the suggested TCC-containing module because one must accommodate both language-instruction goals and demands concerning the development of appropriate attitudes toward certain cultures. According to Brown (2014), no separation exists when acquiring another tongue; hence comes SCT (Vygotsky, 1978). Together with ICC (Byram, 1997, 2020), these theories lead to some interesting findings about what language actually is. They claim it is more than just an instrument used solely for communication purposes. Instead, they argue that it can also serve as a means through which people reflect upon things associated with where they come from.

Conceptual Definitions

Traditional Chinese culture (TCC) involved here consists of three successive stages in order of their degree of abstraction: (1) material culture (concrete physical forms); (2) institutions (norms); and finally (3) spirituality (abstractions). Learners proceed gradually from one stage to another according to Vygotsky's (1978) theory. That is, abstract thinking works best if people start by contacting something tangible before moving toward greater abstraction step by step. Considering all this, 'traditional' means both ancient inheritance in general and Ganzhou's special local characteristics in particular; hence attention will focus partly upon some Hakka folk elements along with local features relating to revolution.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) was defined by Vygotsky (1978) as the gap between a learner's independent linguistic and conceptual ability and the complex cultural-linguistic tasks they can complete with structured teacher or material scaffolding support.

Design and Development Research (DDR) refers to a systematic iterative research methodology focusing on developing, expert-validating and classroom-testing instructional interventions to resolve real-world pedagogical challenges (Richey & Klein, 2007).

Reflexive Intercultural Competence: A Localized Extension of Byram's ICC Model

Conventional applications of Byram's (1997) ICC in mainstream EFL pedagogy centre on a one-way analytical dynamic: students take their native culture as a fixed baseline to examine Western target-language cultures, an orientation widely adopted in Western intercultural teaching research. This study extends the original ICC framework by proposing the construct of Reflexive Intercultural Competence, which reverses the standard analytical logic for Chinese senior high EFL contexts. Within this revised model, students use English as a mediating language to unpack their own TCC (Lu & Zhang, 2024).

It is therefore more than merely receptive cultural knowledge acquisition; reactive elements are also involved. Students explain what they have long known about certain customs in another language. Hence, they consciously become strangers again to some aspects of their own cultures. Gradually, they will no longer regard these conventions as natural but rather see them as historical constructs of society. These changes lead to the fifth element mentioned above: *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness); thus, students gain the ability to mediate their Chinese cultural identity in international communicative contexts.

Vygotsky's SCT & ZPD Scaffolding Theory

It is reflexive ICC that specifies what learners need to achieve if teachers carry out TCC-oriented lessons according to plan. As for how to teach, there will certainly be a ZPD problem. Here again one may refer to Lantolf (2000). Another difficulty lies in the great mental effort required when advanced-level elements about TCC appear suddenly at the Senior High Year One stage itself; these involve complicated matters concerning either Confucian morality codes or Taoist artistic thinking patterns. It is then beyond some students' current command of English.

There is no easy solution to this problem. Therefore, following SCT's basic claim that 'teaching causes growth' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86), there is also a kind of special instructional support called internalized mediation provided by certain mental entities. Such mediating means consist of three types of apparatus: picture-based planners, levelled lists of culturally related words, and examples of presentations and essays.

Working within each student's unique ZPD, these scaffolds support learners to complete complex tasks they cannot yet finish independently. In this framework, classroom teachers and predesigned curriculum resources together function as the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). They transform abstract cultural input into purposeful, collaborative communicative output through guided mediated inquiry (Lantolf, 2000). This layered scaffolding design also aligns with culturally responsive teaching principles suitable for local Chinese EFL classrooms (Zhang & Wu, 2023).

Integrated Theoretical Model

The two theoretical perspectives come together to build the integrated framework for module design, as illustrated in Figure 1. Within this framework, Vygotsky's SCT (1978) delivers the instructional scaffolding mechanism. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) describes how teacher mediation and peer interaction move learners from their existing cultural knowledge toward more sophisticated intercultural understanding. Byram's (1997) ICC

framework specifies the target cultural learning outcomes — the capacities of *savoir*, *savoir faire*, *savoir être*, *savoir apprendre/découvrir*, and *savoir s'engager* — that define intercultural communicative competence.

Building on these two theoretical foundations, the Reflexive ICC paradigm is theoretically derived by merging Byram's notion of *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness) with Vygotsky's sociocultural view of mediated learning. From Byram, it adopts the requirement for learners to achieve critical, reflective stances toward culture; from SCT, it incorporates the principle that such higher-order critical reflection cannot occur spontaneously but must be scaffolded through mediated cultural-linguistic tasks within learners' Zone of Proximal Development. In this synthesis, English operates not merely as a tool for understanding foreign cultures, but as a mediational psychological tool that enables Chinese adolescents to objectify, reinterpret, and articulate their own native TCC heritage.

Byram's intercultural communicative competence model establishes *savoir s'engager*, or critical cultural awareness, as a core evaluative goal for reflective cross-cultural thinking. Even so, it offers little practical instructional guidance for Chinese students who need to examine and voice their own domestic cultural heritage. In contrast, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory supplies actionable scaffolding cantered learning tools, though it does not define clear intercultural learning aims focused on learners' cultural self-expression. Drawing insights from both theoretical standpoints, the Reflexive ICC paradigm emerges as a merged construct. It adopts Byram's emphasis on critical cultural mindfulness and situates this reflective mindset inside Vygotsky's ZPD oriented scaffolding progression. This combined framework enables senior high learners in China to leverage English as a mediating linguistic resource to analyse and communicate both local and nationwide traditional Chinese culture heritage.

Neither theory can fully serve the research goal on its own. SCT alone cannot define clear intercultural learning objectives. Meanwhile, Byram's ICC framework offers no concrete instructional scaffolding sequences for classroom practice. The proposed Reflexive ICC paradigm brings these two theories together. It anchors *savoir s'engager* — the capacity for critical cultural engagement and native culture self-expression — within a Vygotskian scaffolded learning progression. This progression runs across the three-tier framework of material, institutional, and spiritual culture.

Integrated Theoretical Framework

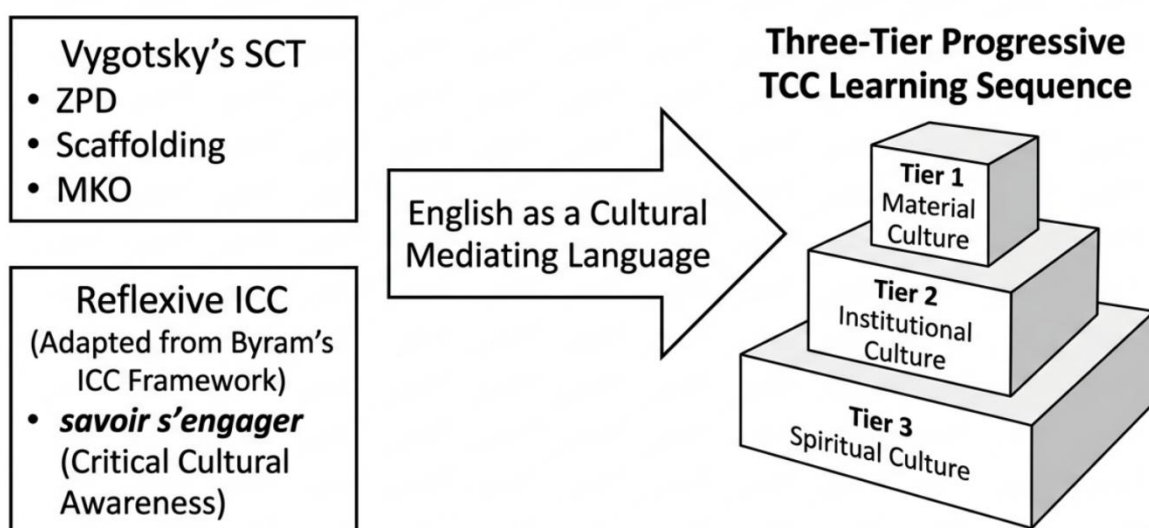


Figure 1: Integrated Theoretical Framework for Three-tier Progressive TCC Instruction

Source: Author's own construction

Methodology

It is also a three-stage DDR project; therefore, it may ensure that what is eventually produced will theoretically make sense and work well when used by teachers at senior high schools throughout China. Every step followed here complies with Creswell and Poth's (2016) criteria concerning development studies.

There are altogether three phases of study, which operate sequentially but also interactively: Phase I performs qualitative needs analysis to clarify practical contextual demands; on the basis of these results, some modules then enter Phase II, where Fuzzy Delphi expert-consensus-guided repeated revisions are conducted until they reach a satisfactory level; finally, they proceed to Phase III, where several classes try using these lessons and produce information about their ease of use and practicability in general.

Research Design

It takes place in three phases. Such a methodology will ensure that what is eventually produced satisfies both theory and practice when teaching senior secondary students in China. In total, there are three stages involved, following the procedures set out by Creswell and Poth (2016) concerning how development work should proceed.

It follows the usual three-stage cycle for conducting DDR research (Richey & Klein, 2007); hence, there is no need to explain what each stage entails, as doing so would merely repeat information already available elsewhere about how one carries out such studies generally. In fact, every DDR study follows these same three steps in order.

Phase I (needs analysis): This shall be carried out qualitatively, which involves identifying actual existing problems concerning bringing more TCC into classes on-site and then summarizing what kind of help local teachers need most regarding this issue. Documents will also undergo a certain amount of study here together with some interview questions raised according to their wishes (Bowen, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Phase II (Design and Development): In this stage, attention will be paid to designing and developing a pilot version of the stratified TCC teaching module according to certain ideas derived from Phase I based on real-world evidence. Therefore, much effort needs to go into making the plan satisfactory and having experts testify whether it makes sense via the Fuzzy Delphi Method (using triangular fuzzy numbers).

Stage III Usability Practicality Evaluation: Carry out naturalistic classroom pilot implementation; evaluate their practical performance according to certain indices involving fidelity measures concerning how lessons were carried out, teachers' own adaptability problems raised during lessons, and pupils' degree of participation in lessons, etc. (Patton, 2014).

Participants

This study adopted purposive sampling to recruit two separate groups of participants for different research stages (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2014). No additional participants were enrolled after preliminary data review confirmed adequate data saturation (Guest et al., 2006). Validation Panel: The expert panel consisted of twelve professionals. They were selected according to certain conditions set by Patton (2014) to fulfil the requirements outlined above concerning the application of the fuzzy Delphi technique. Among these validators, four specialize in curriculum design, and the other eight are English teachers at secondary schools or universities who possess extensive knowledge of how to conduct lessons on "culture" topics in class, based on personal experience gained over many years in the field.

Instruments

This study employed a mixed-methods triangulation approach to collect multi-source empirical data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Multiple tailored research tools were adopted across different DDR phases to ensure comprehensive and valid data collection.

Qualitative Interviews: Phase I adopted semi-structured open-ended interviews to gather first-hand teacher feedback. These interview data captured teachers' real-world challenges in delivering TCC instruction, existing resource shortages, and professional training demands (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Fuzzy Delphi Questionnaires: A specialized FDM evaluation instrument was developed for Phase II module validation. Containing 45 systematic evaluation items, this tool leveraged fuzzy mathematical logic to synthesize and unify professional judgments from participating experts (Chang, 1996).

Evaluation Metrics: Multiple evaluation tools were integrated in Phase III to examine module usability and effectiveness. The research instruments included structured classroom observation protocols, post-pilot student Likert-scale surveys measuring learning engagement, and standardized rubrics for scoring student PBL outputs. This multi-layer assessment system

conforms to the core principles of output-oriented PBL evaluation (Thomas, 2000; Blumenfeld et al., 1991).

Findings

This research strictly followed the standard three-stage DDR procedural framework. Phase I needs analysis clarified practical local teaching barriers and targeted design requirements, which laid a solid foundation for the initial development of the TCC teaching module prototype. In Phase II, expert reviews based on the Fuzzy Delphi Method revised and polished the initial prototype in line with unified expert consensus. The optimized module was subsequently implemented in authentic senior high classrooms in Phase III, with its practical feasibility and teaching effectiveness fully examined through pilot observation and data analysis. Synthesizing empirical data obtained from the three interconnected research stages (Richey & Klein, 2007), this study summarized four coordinated pedagogical pathways to bridge the persistent gap between TCC education policies and frontline classroom practices.

Collectively, these instructional pathways connect abstract intercultural competence cultivation with concrete linguistic learning outcomes. They well address the practical instructional needs and difficulties repeatedly highlighted by local Grade 1 English teachers in prior localized research (Lu & Zhang, 2024).

Barriers to TCC teaching in Ganzhou (Response to Research Question 1)

Thematic coding of Phase I interview transcripts and textbook analysis data successfully identified four interrelated and mutually restrictive core barriers. These key obstacles fundamentally hinder systematic and effective TCC instruction for Ganzhou Grade 1 English teachers, providing a complete empirical answer to the first research question.

Institutional assessment pressure: The prominent washback effect of the Gaokao examination dominates daily senior high English teaching. Class instruction prioritizes exam-oriented training in grammar, reading and vocabulary. Most teachers regard cultural instruction as non-essential content that may interfere with score improvement. Therefore, they are reluctant to allocate limited classroom time to TCC-related teaching activities (Bailey, 1999).

Resource deficit: Local senior high education lacks graded and localized TCC teaching resources. No available teaching materials systematically integrate national traditional culture with Ganzhou's distinctive Hakka customs and red revolutionary culture. Overburdened by heavy weekly teaching tasks, local teachers are unable to independently design and develop scaffolded cultural teaching lessons.

Teacher epistemic anxiety: Most frontline teachers do not possess in-depth understanding of traditional Chinese philosophical thoughts and aesthetic concepts. They also struggle to transform sophisticated cultural connotations into simple, accurate and academic English expressions. This practical dilemma confines their cultural teaching practice within individual linguistic and cognitive constraints, corresponding to the features of personal ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf, 2000).

Fragmented textbook design: Mainstream senior high English textbooks only contain sporadic and superficial TCC supplementary contents. These scattered cultural fragments lack

hierarchical and progressive design, failing to form a complete and coherent cultural teaching system for daily classroom instruction (Lu & Zhang, 2024).

The four pedagogical pathways developed and refined through iterative DDR design and classroom pilot testing are specifically targeted at the above four localized teaching barriers, with each pathway corresponding to one practical instructional challenge.

Four Integrated Pedagogical Pathways

This developmental research finally generalized four systematic and practical core pedagogical pathways for localized TCC instruction. The complete framework of these instructional pathways is organized and presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Four Integrated Pedagogical Pathways for TCC Integration in Senior High English Instruction

Pathway	Core Design Logic	Classroom Implementation Form	Core Theoretical Basis
1 Tripartite Cultural Dimension	Gradated cultural progression from concrete to abstract	Unit 1 Material Culture Unit 2 Institutional Culture Unit 3 Spiritual Culture	Vygotsky's ZPD, Byram's ICC
2 PBL Output-Oriented Learning	Task-driven authentic linguistic output	Cultural brochure Cross-cultural presentation Reflective essay	Blumenfeld et al., Thomas
3 Multi-Level Scaffolding Strategies	Alleviate cultural-linguistic cognitive overload for learners	Graphic organizers, themed vocabulary glossaries, model texts	Lantolf, Vygotsky
4 Teacher as Cultural Mediator	Address teachers' epistemic anxiety in TCC instruction	Structured teacher manual with background resources and discussion prompts	Zhang & Wu, Merriam

Source: Author's own construction

Path 1: Tripartite Cultural Dimension

This research constructs a staged learning sequence that progresses from concrete experiential perception to abstract cognitive reasoning. This hierarchical learning design complies with the scaffolding progression principles of sociocultural pedagogy (Lantolf, 2000).

Material Culture (Unit 1: Festivals and Heritage): This unit focuses on tangible cultural relics, traditional seasonal customs, and distinctive Hakka heritage in Ganzhou. It provides intuitive and approachable learning entry points suitable for senior high students' cognitive characteristics.

Institutional Culture (Unit 2: Confucian Ethics and Social Norms): This module explores traditional interpersonal values and conventional social frameworks embedded in Chinese daily life, helping students understand the normative connotations of traditional culture.

Spiritual Culture (Unit 3: Chinese Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Identity): This unit guides students to interpret profound traditional aesthetic thoughts and ideological concepts through English expression. It effectively cultivates learners' critical cultural awareness, which corresponds to the core dimension of Byram's ICC framework (Byram, 1997).

Path 2: Project-Based & Output-Oriented Learning

To address the superficial and fragmented cultural presentation in mainstream textbooks, this module takes project-based learning (PBL) as its core instructional approach (Thomas, 2000). Different from rigid, discrete knowledge drills, this design stimulates students' learning initiative through authentic communicative task demands. Each unit ends with a comprehensive productive task to consolidate learning outcomes:

Unit 1: A Cultural Heritage Brochure

Unit 2: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Presentation

Unit 3: A Personal Cultural Identity Essay

These systematic output tasks transform students' passive knowledge memorization into active and purposeful linguistic practice. Such student-led and inquiry-based projects follow the fundamental motivational mechanisms of PBL. Authentic and tangible learning outputs sustain students' long-term classroom engagement (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). Furthermore, this output-centered teaching design conforms to the assessment orientation specified in national senior high English curriculum standards (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

Path 3: Multi-Level Scaffolding Strategies

Exploring profound cultural themes in English imposes substantial cognitive pressure on lower-intermediate senior high learners. Based on Vygotsky's ZPD theory (Vygotsky, 1978), this study adopts hierarchical scaffolding tools to reduce learning difficulty and bridge students' cognitive gaps. The module integrates three levels of targeted supportive resources to assist progressive learning:

Graphic Organizers: Visual logic mapping templates assist students in sorting out cross-cultural comparison ideas before oral and written tasks, clarifying their learning thinking.

Lexical Scaffolds: Thematic vocabulary lists covering festival culture, traditional ethics and philosophical concepts equip students with basic linguistic support for cultural expression.

Model Texts: Standard samples of brochures, presentation scripts and reflective essays provide reliable learning references for students' imitation, adaptation and independent creation.

The layered scaffolding system effectively lowers linguistic and cognitive barriers. It enables students to accomplish complex cultural learning tasks within their respective developmental zones and achieve continuous ability improvement (Lantolf, 2000).

Path 4: Teacher as Cultural Mediator

The pilot and preceding semi-structured interviews revealed widespread epistemic anxiety among Ganzhou English teachers when explaining abstract TCC content in English (Merriam, 2002). To alleviate this barrier, the module reconstructs the teacher's role as a cultural mediator equipped with two types of supportive resources:

Structured Teacher Manuals: Pre-organized cultural background, discussion prompts and predictive analysis of student misunderstandings;

Teacher-targeted pedagogical scaffolds: A full replicable lesson framework serving as informal professional development, strengthening teachers' confidence in intercultural dialogue facilitation (Zhang & Wu, 2023).

Pilot observation, student survey responses and rubric evaluation of PBL products revealed preliminary positive trends: participants demonstrated greater willingness to interpret and present local and national TCC in English, as well as visible progress in reflective cultural expression. These are observed trends rather than statistically verified pre-post improvements, given the scope of the present pilot.

During classroom implementation, judgements regarding students' English language proficiency drew on task level outputs mapped to Gaokao competence expectations. Assessment evidence covered learners' reading comprehension performance, argument focused reflective writing pieces, and linguistic precision demonstrated in project-based learning presentations. All these task related outputs align with the ability standards laid out within China's national senior high English curriculum and Gaokao assessment framework. Evaluations completed by classroom instructors alongside rubric marked student work collected throughout the pilot phase showed no obvious deterioration in these examination-oriented language skill outputs. It is critical to highlight that such observational findings stem from teacher led task evaluations, instead of data obtained from formal pre and post intervention standardised examinations.

Discussion

The systematic development and Ganzhou-based pilot implementation of the TCC-integrated teaching module reveal two core tensions restricting indigenous cultural education within Chinese exam-driven senior high EFL contexts: the compatibility of cultural tasks with Gaokao training, and the trade-off between cultural authenticity and learners limited linguistic capacity. These two dilemmas are fully resolved through the four integrated pedagogical pathways extracted from DDR data (Richey & Klein, 2007).

Tension 1: Cultural Teaching vs Gaokao Assessment

High-stakes testing has long prevailed within secondary EFL contexts. Its powerful influence makes curriculum innovation difficult because nothing, but culture seems important for examinations. Some teachers mentioned in Phase I teacher interviews in Ganzhou (Merriam, 2002) said that according to Gaokao guidelines, more class hours need to be devoted to learning grammar rules, developing students' vocabulary size, improving their ability to understand what they have just read, instead of cultivating their own personalities.

The TCC module envisioned by this research does not aim to replace normal examination-oriented lessons altogether, since it is simply another form of teaching added to existing courses. In fact, according to preliminary surveys conducted during earlier field tests, teachers welcomed such an additional approach warmly, precisely because brochures on certain topics, intercultural presentations on specific subjects, or reflections on particular issues relate rather well to what they themselves have always wanted students to develop more of: namely, their ability to read something carefully before analyzing its contents logically in order to eventually express themselves clearly while writing formal essays on that topic later (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

TCC instruction likewise needs no longer be treated merely as something extra outside regular lessons; instead, they can serve as carriers for certain kinds of linguistic competence development activities. With these changes come fewer reasons to worry about choosing between teaching culture and improving test scores, solving another problem raised earlier by Lu and Zhang (2024). In addition, there will be less difficulty preparing lessons because teachers themselves have built a scaffold according to their own needs during construction.

Tension 2: Cultural Authenticity and Learner Linguistic Proficiency

There appears to be another key teaching problem regarding how to balance real culture orientation with easy language availability. Genuine cultural experience is essential for building good ICC according to Byram (1997; 2020). Nevertheless, during the Phase III pilot, teachers found that if they did nothing but directly bring difficult spirituality-related issues raised therein to freshmen of Senior One, insurmountable difficulty would emerge because pupils could hardly understand complicated cultural implications or say something satisfactory in English unless they were helped linguistically and cognitively in class.

This study validates that authentic cultural instruction should not adopt uniform, one-stage delivery. In line with Vygotsky's ZPD and sociocultural learning principles (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf, 2000), authentic cultural content requires gradual, scaffolded progression. The three-tier cultural framework in Path 1 achieves this balanced progression systematically. Instruction unfolds sequentially from tangible material heritage and local folk traditions to intangible social norms and abstract ideological aesthetics. Such a cognitive-friendly progression aligns with adolescent learners' existing knowledge schema and thinking patterns, rendering profound traditional and local cultural content learnable and expressible for lower-intermediate EFL students.

The multiple layers of graphics, vocabulary, and texts described above in Path Three reduce the distance from where learners are now linguistically to very difficult culture-related subjects. Hence, they can also help learners build reflective intercultural when they have only an

intermediate knowledge of English. This kind of multi-level approach is one answer to how things might actually work in places without good conditions for foreign-language culture study.

Dialogue with Prior Empirical Studies

This section conducts a comparative discussion against existing scholarship, fulfilling the integrative function of literature review. It contrasts the outcomes of the current investigation with published studies on TCC oriented intercultural English teaching and clarifies the original contributions made by this research.

First, much established ICC related research centres on cross cultural analysis of Western cultural contexts (Byram, 1997, 2020). By comparison, the Reflexive ICC framework developed in the present study reverses this conventional learning direction. It places Chinese learners' expression of their own native culture heritage at the heart of senior high classroom practice, representing a theoretical extension rarely addressed in previous textbook focused domestic research (Lu & Zhang, 2024). Lu and Zhang's (2024) content analysis study identified structural weaknesses of fragmented TCC representation in textbooks, yet did not deliver validated, step by step teaching interventions. The three tier cultural dimension pathway constructed in this paper fills this practical design-oriented research gap.

Second, earlier cultural teaching studies adopting PBL frameworks have mainly examined improvements in student motivation (Zhang & Wu, 2023). Such prior work has overlooked two prominent local constraints: Gaokao driven washback pressure and teachers' epistemic anxiety around cultural instruction. By contrast, the four-pathway intervention proposed here attends simultaneously to students' linguistic growth, teacher support needs and assessment alignment. It therefore delivers a more comprehensive solution than interventions built around a single focus PBL design.

Third, few existing DDR based studies within Chinese EFL education target inland regional contexts such as Ganzhou. This research embeds local Hakka folk customs and red revolutionary heritage directly into module development, generating context specific teaching solutions unavailable from one size fits all national cultural resources. Unlike many descriptive classroom surveys on TCC integration, the present project strengthens empirical rigour by including both Fuzzy Delphi expert validation and real-world classroom pilot implementation phases.

Conclusion and Implications

Summary of Core Findings

Through a three-phase DDR workflow, this study designed, trialled and verified four interconnected pedagogical pathways. Together, they form a repeatable framework to embed traditional Chinese culture content into senior high English lessons. The Tripartite Cultural Dimension pathway establishes a clear learning progression, moving learners from tangible cultural artefacts towards more abstract philosophical and identity related reflection. Project Based and Output Oriented Learning re positions cultural content as a medium for practising examination relevant language skills, rather than treating it as an optional, add on topic. Multi-level Scaffolding successfully reduced cognitive and linguistic demands when students

explored complex local heritage themes. This outcome was confirmed by learners' ability to finish rubric assessed PBL assignments across all three cultural units. The fourth pathway, where teachers act as Cultural Mediators, helps ease the widespread professional anxiety felt by front line educators concerning their own cultural knowledge and English expressive capacity.

Taken together, these four pathways offer Ganzhou senior high English teachers an evidence based, structured roadmap. Educators are supported to move beyond superficial, token cultural activities and deliver systematic reflexive intercultural education. This balanced model nurtures students' cultural confidence while still satisfying the linguistic training requirements shaped by the Gaokao.

Study Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This preliminary pilot was conducted exclusively in Ganzhou Municipality, with only two teachers and 80 Grade 1 student participants. Therefore, findings cannot be generalized to senior high contexts in coastal eastern China, nor can they be extended to Grade 2 and Grade 3 learners. Only one-semester data was collected; accordingly, we have no evidence regarding whether observed learning gains persist across a full academic year. Furthermore, the instructional module was tailored to intermediate-level Grade-1 students. Differentiated supports for low-proficiency beginners and gifted high-achieving learners were not developed or evaluated within the current scope. These limitations point to meaningful avenues for future empirical investigation.

Practical & Policy Implications

The results yield recommendations for classroom practitioners, school administrators and national curriculum designers.

For Front line English Teachers: The four integrated pathways and accompanying teacher support materials provide ready-made graded cultural scaffolds. These resources reduce the heavy workload of independently designing culture focused lessons. Teachers may implement the tiered cultural sequence and PBL output tasks to deliver TCC instruction without cutting back on exam-oriented skill practice.

For School Administrators: Schools should allocate fixed weekly teaching time for project based cultural activities. Professional learning communities can be established, enabling teachers to collaborate and adapt local Hakka and red culture resources for English lessons. Shared curriculum development helps to reduce the individual preparation burden on teachers. For National Policy Makers: Curriculum authorities are encouraged to produce standardised, graded TCC teaching materials that align with Gaokao assessment objectives. Such resources would help resolve the long-reported problem of fragmented cultural content in mainstream textbooks. Both preservice and in service teacher training programmes should place greater emphasis on equipping educators to explain Chinese philosophical ideas in accessible English. This training intervention could ease the widespread epistemic anxiety identified in the qualitative data of this study.

Future Research Directions

Although this DDR project confirmed the short-term practicality of the TCC integrated teaching module and its positive effect on learner engagement, four promising strands of follow up research have emerged:

Longitudinal Tracking: Future developmental research could monitor changes in student English proficiency and Reflexive ICC development over one full academic year. Long term data would reveal whether improvements in cultural knowledge and learner cultural identity remain stable over time.

Scalability and Contextual Adaptation: Multi site replication studies across coastal, central and western provinces are needed. Such work can test how far the three tier TCC framework generalises and adjust the pedagogical pathways for regional cultural settings outside Ganzhou's Hakka heritage context.

Differentiated Scaffolding Research: New interventions may create and evaluate vocabulary based and visual scaffolding resources specifically for low, intermediate and high level senior high English learners. Targeted differentiated support can better manage uneven cognitive load across student subgroups.

Assessment Reform Research: Mixed methods investigations could explore potential adjustments to Gaokao spoken and written marking criteria. If reflexive native cultural narration in English receives formal recognition in high-stakes assessment, institutional barriers against TCC integration would be further weakened.

In closing, connecting foreign language learning to cultural heritage is far more than a curriculum requirement. It represents a necessary pedagogical step to nurture reflexive intercultural speakers. These young learners will then be able to explain and share diverse strands of Chinese culture — including Ganzhou's distinctive local traditions — confidently with global audiences, through authentic English language communication.

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