



Article

Enhancing Intercultural Competence and Global Awareness through Digital International Education

Lesia Yevdokimova-Lysohor ¹, Svitlana Semeniuk ², Andrii Sherehii ³,
Tetiana Zhytnik ⁴ and Oksana Snigovska ⁵

¹National University “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy”, Kyiv, Ukraine; University of Burgos, Spain, ² State University of Trade and Economics, Kyiv, Ukraine, ³ Uzhhorod National University, Uzhhorod, Ukraine, ⁴ Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University, Melitopol, Ukraine, ⁵ Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University, Odesa, Ukraine

Correspondence: lyevdokimova@ubu.es

Abstract

*The gradual development of technology has deeply influenced the knowledge base and the teaching of traditional culture. This study aims to develop a digital education course in traditional English culture and examine the effects of the course on English language proficiency (ELP) and intercultural competence (IC) among 150 students who learn English. The pre-test–post-test control group design of the quasi-experiment was used. The proposed course introduces EFL learners to traditional English culture using Google Arts & Culture and YouVisit apps. The results show its effectiveness in improving both ELP and IC variables. Even though language proficiency increased in both the control and intervention groups, students who took the proposed course exhibited slightly more significant improvement compared to the control group. The intercultural knowledge score increased 2.68 points in the control group and 4.03 points in the intervention group. The Cohen’s *d* values were 0.59 and 0.72, respectively, indicating medium and significant effect sizes. The results have important implications for language teachers to promote language acquisition, enhance cultural understanding among students, and make the teaching and learning foreign languages more effective and engaging.*

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, cross-cultural education, culture-related knowledge, digital education, English language proficiency, pedagogic technology

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Introduction

In today's globalized world, cultural exchange is actively taking place under the influence of cultural diversity. That is why intercultural learning is increasingly incorporated into education and curriculum development (Sleeter, 2018). Multiculturalism is associated with interculturalism, cultural identity, and tolerance. The essence of multiculturalism can be described by three multiculturalism concepts: democratic, prescriptive, and holistic. In educational practice, a multicultural student consciously or unconsciously adopts a specific acculturation strategy to learn, understand, and assimilate a new culture and determine their degree of participation (Wolff & Borzikowsky, 2018).

Culture can only be learned through its language. If the language is limited, then its culture is similarly limited. To learn about another/foreign culture, you must learn its language, but there is not always a chance to learn a foreign language (Brook et al., 2020). The specificity of the mission of intercultural education results from interpreting the generally formulated educational goals in the context of global processes and the development of multicultural communities (Fitzpatrick, 2022; Kong, 2024). It can be described in the form of the following postulates: 1) learning to know (mastering the ability to learn and understand the world in the perspective of interdependence and cultural complexity), 2) learning to act (mastering the ability to act effectively in conditions of cultural heterogeneity), 3) learning to live together (mastering the ability to live together in multicultural communities in an atmosphere of peace, trust, mutual respect, responsibility and tolerance) and 4) learning to be (mastering the ability to manage one's development and self-fulfillment in a world of cultural ambiguity) (Li, 2024).

The analysis of these postulates allows for the identification of specific functions of the discipline in question, which include: 1) the cognitive function: exploring and explaining the culturally complex pedagogical reality and the processes of education, upbringing and socialization taking place within it, 2) the adaptive function: supporting the processes of adaptation of individuals and social groups to functioning in conditions of cultural heterogeneity, 3) the transformational function: supporting the harmoniousness of socio-cultural change in the collective and individual dimension (in specific situations, when educational activities aim to increase the subjectivity and social participation of socially excluded or marginalized groups, the transformational function takes on the meaning of emancipatory activities) (Song, 2023). Intercultural education is an area of theoretical consideration, and research studies focus on the determinants of the development processes of individuals, institutions, and social communities in a culturally diverse world (Li & Gong, 2023). It

is also a program of practical activities that develop the ability to understand and function harmoniously and effectively in that world, shape attitudes of trust, tolerance, cohesion, a sense of connection and mutual solidarity, and the ability to build social bonds in culturally heterogeneous communities (Al-Shehri et al., 2021). The macro-social goal is the transformation of consciousness that enables the development of a sense of universal solidarity and the construction of a democratic and multicultural civil society (Werner & Tegge, 2020). The actions taken are addressed to all age groups: children, youth, and adults representing the dominant group in a given area or established cultural minorities, as well as people preparing for migration and incoming migrants (temporary workers, repatriates, refugees, and immigrants). Each of the aforementioned groups is characterized by different needs and conditions for acquiring new competencies.

Intercultural competence and communication between interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds are among the most popular research topics and diploma theses (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral theses). The study will explore how intercultural competence is formed in the process of learning a foreign language.

The study aims to determine the effectiveness of the developed digital course in forming intercultural competence during the process of learning English as a foreign language.

The objectives of the study are:

- 1) to develop a digital course for learning English as a foreign language, in which the central aspect is the cultural component;
- 2) to determine how a digital course affects the level of English language proficiency and the formation of cultural competence;
- 3) to discover how digital technologies affect English language learning and cultural awareness.

Literature Review

Intercultural competency

Defining intercultural competencies should begin with understanding what cultural competencies are. Without them, an individual will not reach the next level of development, which is having an intercultural vision of the world. A specific analogy can be seen - as intercultural education cannot exist without regional education, cultural competencies are primarily about intercultural competencies (Han et al., 2022; Shen, 2023). Cultural competence is the ability to function freely and satisfactorily in a culture with accepted norms and patterns. They enable full-scale participation in culture. A culturally competent person freely "moves" in their own culture, is aware

of the differences between cultures, and, as a result, is mindful of their own beliefs regarding them and reactions to differences in cultural contact. Being culturally competent also means acting effectively in other cultural environments (Kecskes et al., 2018). In the literature on the subject, various intercultural competence models exist. Their authors draw attention to the multiple criteria and components of the so-called intercultural sensitivity. The model closest to our understanding of intercultural competence is Chiu and Shi's model, in which intercultural competence is not autonomous from other competencies possessed by the subject and does not constitute a separate segment of knowledge, skills, interpretation, and perception of the world (Chiu & Shi, 2019).

All the competencies we possess (individual, social, professional, strategic) should be related to the intercultural reception of the world. According to this model, the key elements of intercultural learning include the ability to describe and explain intercultural processes of one's own and foreign cultures, knowledge of foreign languages, willingness to learn, and openness to the Other (Douglas & Rosvold, 2018). Intercultural competence is the ability to adopt an attitude of cultural relativism in contact with representatives of other cultures (Wang & Chen, 2020).

The presented understanding of intercultural competencies fits into the knowledge of competencies as the adaptive and transgressive potential of the subject (Kim, 2020). An interculturally competent individual has knowledge (understood as information about reality acquired during receiving cultural content) concerning their own and foreign cultural circles. It also copes perfectly with reorganizing the cultural world (Tarchi & Surian, 2022). Intercultural competencies enable a different, expanded perception of the world and, through decentration, coordinate two or more possibilities of seeing reality (Ruiz & Spínola, 2019). The process of interculturalism, which, by influencing various spheres of human life, triggers and creates mutual exchange and interactions outside the center, evokes specific interpersonal communication related to the need to go beyond the boundaries of one's own culture, shapes the ability to be and function on the cultural, intellectual, psychological, social and similar borderlands (Makhmudov, 2020).

Being culturally competent often means being aware of how one's own culture differs from others and committing to exploring different cultures (Avgousti, 2018). The journey toward cultural awareness is a process that involves learning about various historical events, traditions, beliefs, and socio-political contexts behind them. Doing so efficiently is through direct experience (Azadipour, 2019). Cultural exchange programs, study-abroad initiatives, and cross-cultural collaborative projects allow students to immerse themselves in an unfamiliar cultural context, challenge their

assumptions, and expand their perspectives. Self-reflection allows one to recognize cultural biases and beliefs on this journey and approach other cultures with an open mind (Freitag-Hild, 2018). Based on these definitions, several courses have been developed to improve students' intercultural competence skills (Wang, 2023). However, further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of this methodology.

Traditional Culture Education

Exposure to traditional culture helps students develop cultural competence, which is critical to living and working in the modern world, where most societies are culturally diverse (Heggernes, 2021). Traditional culture refers to the customs, beliefs, values, and cultural practices of a group of people handed down from generation to generation (Pena-Dix, 2018). It is often considered the foundation of a society's identity.

Traditional culture education can enhance an individual's humanistic quality and cultural literacy in two significant ways: (1) by providing a deeper understanding and appreciation for one's cultural heritage and (2) through exposure to other cultures. Students develop empathy, respect, and open-mindedness by learning about practices, beliefs, values, and customs that are part of a culture other than their own (Nie, 2023). Traditional culture can complement modern education by taking learning beyond the textbook. Hence, traditional culture enables students to expand their professional knowledge when integrated into the curriculum, which is currently the case for English, history, art, and other majors (Esalati & Rahmanpana, 2020).

Immersion in traditional culture can help students enhance their sense of social responsibility, advance practical abilities, stimulate innovative thinking, expand their worldview, and improve their ability to communicate cross-culturally (Rabiah, 2018). At the same time, different studies have shown mixed results. It is argued that traditional culture can enrich and improve the ideological education system (Freiermuth & Huang, 2021), but incorporating it into the curriculum can also promote the development and practice of new media (Lee, 2020). Internet culture has brought serious challenges to traditional culture, which could be resolved by creating databases of traditional cultural works, online classes, and e-commerce. Research related to the theory of speech acts has led to the fact that practical learning of using language today consists of improving communicative competence. Such a purely pragmalinguistic concept of language education does not satisfy all educators because cognitive considerations of the linguistic image of the world convincingly testify to the values of the cognitive approach to selected linguistic issues (Rodríguez-Abitia & Bribiesca-Correa, 2021; Galang-Pereña, 2024).

The study also showed that digital teaching materials are much better adapted to the needs of students and the labour market than textbooks used in traditional courses. Their most significant advantages are authenticity, interactivity, and multimedia. They are delivered via educational platforms as modules and lessons, which the student has a specific time to complete (Howard, 2018). Another significant advantage of using information and communication technologies (ICT) is the multitude and variety of materials and tools designed for learning foreign languages. The numerical advantage of digital resources over traditional ones, for example, in a bookstore or library, is noticeable. The Internet user has numerous websites, programs, courses, platforms, and applications (Nagy, 2018). It is also important that learning on the Internet is multi-sensory and interactive. Thanks to interesting graphics and podcasts, the learner can assimilate and consolidate the given educational material more effectively.

Methodology

The current study employed a structured approach to design, implement, and assess the digital education course on traditional English culture. Assessing the course outcomes involved comparing data from the formative and summative evaluations. The study is quasi-experimental, meaning participants are divided into experimental and control groups. The intervention lasted 3 months and involved learning English culture through mobile apps under the supervision of three teachers.

The study involved 150 EFL students from the Professional College of Kyiv International University (Kyiv, Ukraine) and Odesa I. I. Mechnikov National University (majoring in International Relations, Public Communications, and Regional Studies). The participants were randomly selected from the list of all students learning EFL at the time of inquiry (the administration provided the list). The selection criteria were beginner EFL learners who focused on basic language skills. Consequently, participants were first- and second-year students aged 18 to 25. The students were randomly assigned to one of two groups of equal size: 75 students who took the proposed course (intervention group) and 75 students enrolled in the standard training program for English learners (control group).

In this study, the effect of the course on IC in the EFL context was measured using the Intercultural Competence Scale (ICS) (Chao, 2014). The ICS assesses five facets of IC: intercultural knowledge ("I know the routine aspects of life in other cultures"), affective orientation towards intercultural interaction ("I am willing to modify my attitude and behavior for interacting appropriately with people of other cultures"), self-efficacy in intercultural situations ("I am confident that I can adjust to

the stress of culture shock”), behavioral performance in intercultural interaction (“I can effectively use English to communicate with other people of different cultural backgrounds”), and display of intercultural consciousness (“I can realize the cultural knowledge I apply to intercultural interaction”). It has 36 items, each ranked on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree”. The total IC score was calculated by summing scores of individual items. The internal consistency of the ICS was high, as measured by Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha = 0.70$).

The level of ELP was measured twice, before and after the course. The online assessment took place in a classroom setting under teacher supervision. The English Level Test used in this study consists of 60 items and is available at: <https://test-english.com/level-test/>.

Quantitative data was analyzed with SPSS Statistics v21. Cohen’s d , which is the difference between means divided by the pooled within-group standard deviation, was used as an effect size for differences between baseline and post-intervention IC scores ($d \leq 0.2$ = small effect size, $d \leq 0.5$ = medium effect size, and $d \leq 0.8$ = large effect size).

The study only involved students from two educational institutions in Ukraine, and all of the participants were of Ukrainian nationality, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural and educational contexts. In addition, the study did not consider potential confounding variables that could influence the results, such as previous exposure to English culture, individual learning styles, students’ motivation levels, and extracurricular activities.

All participants gave informed consent to participate in the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. To de-identify participants, the researchers removed all names and assigned pseudonyms.

Results

English culture course design

This course aims to provide ESL learners with an interactive cultural experience using digital technologies. Through interactive multimedia content and collaborative online projects, students explore different aspects of English cultural heritage while improving their English language skills. Figure 1 summarizes the main objectives of intervention.

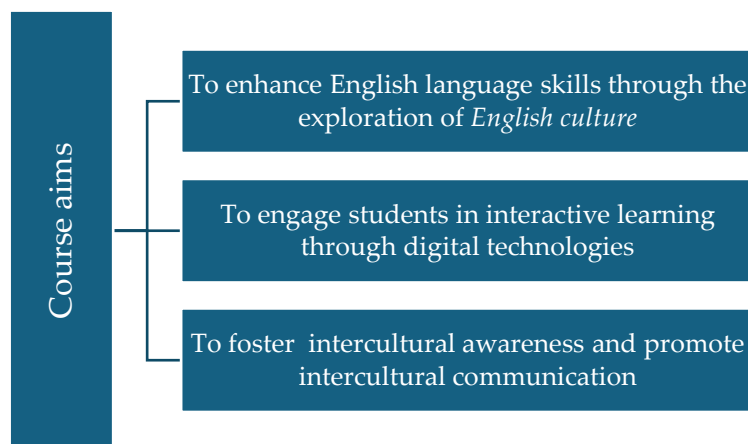


Figure 1. Objectives of the traditional English culture course

Source: developed by the authors

The proposed course has five modules, each with theoretical and practical materials. Two mobile apps were integrated into the curriculum: Google Arts & Culture and YouVisit. The course outline is presented below.

Module 1: Introduction to English Culture.

This module unit is intended to introduce EFL learners to the underlying elements of English heritage through Google Arts & Culture, a mobile app for exploring the world's art and culture. The app takes users on a virtual tour of museums, historical sites, and cultural attractions worldwide. This app uses virtual reality technology to present the UK's museum spaces. This allows students to visit museums virtually without travelling to them in person. Figure 2 shows examples of works from this museum.



Figure 2. Examples of images of artworks and cultural artefacts

Module 2: British History and Monarchs.

This module also used a mobile app that allowed students to visit exhibitions about historical figures and events.

Module 3: British Customs and Festivals.

This module focused on studying British culture, including traditions, customs, and festivals, through virtual excursions. This allowed students to understand the culture of the language they were learning better, contributing to the formation of cultural competence.

Module 4: English Countryside.

In this module, students used YouVisit to take virtual tours of the UK landscape while exploring architecture and cultural buildings. This broadened their horizons and cultural knowledge and fostered the development of cultural competence. YouVisit can be accessed through a variety of devices, including desktop computers, mobile

phones, tablets, and VR headsets, which means that all students in the study can embark on YouVisit virtual tours.

Module 5: Contemporary British Culture.

This module supported interactive discussions about modern British society and cultural trends. On the visual journey, students were exposed to multiple pieces of contemporary art, fashion, and music showcased in virtual exhibits on Google Arts & Culture. Figure 3 shows one example of interactive materials presented to EFL learners.

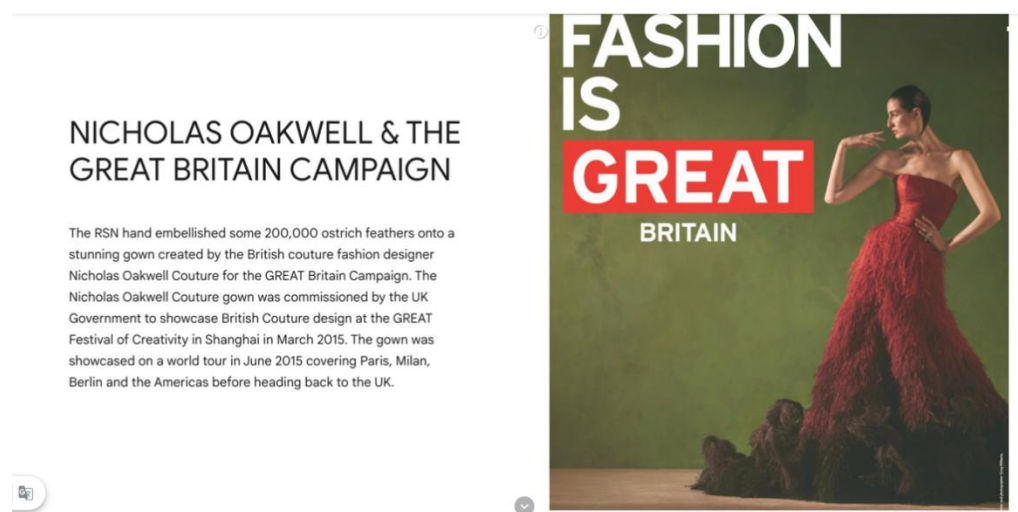


Figure 3. A screenshot depicting an example of interactive material offered by Google Arts & Culture

The exhibitions included works by British artists and designers in general (e.g., contemporary art, photography, multimedia installations) and in specific (e.g., street art, environmental activism, multiculturalism) cultural fields. Students were encouraged to analyze these works, discuss social issues, and reflect on the cultural significance of contemporary British art.

Evaluating the course's effectiveness

Table 1 below presents the mean scores of the IC subscales before and after the interaction. Both groups improved their level of intercultural knowledge, yet EFL learners who took the proposed course demonstrated slightly more significant gains than those who received standard training.

Table 1. Scores on the IC subscales

	Conventional learning		Interactive learning	
	Baseline	Post-intervention	Baseline	Post-intervention
	M	M	M	M
Intercultural knowledge	41.82	44.50	41.79	45.82
Affective orientation towards intercultural interaction	31.41	32.65	32.14	35.00
Self-efficacy in intercultural situations	12.06	12.76	12.43	14.00
Behavioral performance in intercultural interaction	27.71	31.00	28.29	31.59
Display of intercultural consciousness	23.71	25.50	24.43	26.35

Likewise, both groups exhibited improvement in affective orientation toward intercultural interaction, with the gain being more noticeable among students who took the proposed course. The same applies to self-efficacy in intercultural situations, behavioral performance in intercultural interaction, and intercultural consciousness. These findings suggest that the proposed course is more effective than conventional training in enhancing intercultural knowledge, cultivating a positive attitude toward intercultural interaction, improving the perceived ability to navigate intercultural contexts, and raising intercultural awareness in EFL learners.

Table 2. Cohen's *d* values for the control group and the intervention group

Group	Mean Difference	Pooled Standard Deviation	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Control	2.68	4.54	0.59
Intervention	4.03	5.56	0.72

As presented in Table 2 above, the effect size for the difference between baseline and post-intervention scores of intercultural knowledge in the control group is 0.59, which represents a medium effect size. For the intervention group, the Cohen's value is 0.72, which indicates a large effect size. The results show that differences in

intercultural knowledge were significant for both groups. A larger effect size in the intervention group suggests that the proposed course had a more substantial impact on this IC factor than conventional learning, even though the difference was slight.

Before the intervention, 5% of EFL learners in the control group were at the A1 level, 15% were at the A2 level, 55% were at the B1 level, 20% were at the B2 level, and 5% were at the C1 level. None achieved the highest proficiency level of C2. The distribution of baseline EP levels in the intervention group was as follows: A1, 5%; A2, 10%; B1, 50%; B2, 25%; C1, 10%. Similarly to the control group, none had the C2 proficiency level.

Following the completion of the language learning experiment, the language proficiency levels of participants in both the control and experimental groups were assessed to evaluate the extent of their improvement (see Table 3).

Table 3: English test results by language proficiency level

Group	Language proficiency level	Baseline	Post-intervention
Control	A1 (Beginner)	5%	3%
Control	A2 (Elementary)	15%	10%
Control	B1 (Intermediate)	55%	50%
Control	B2 (Upper Intermediate)	20%	25%
Control	C1 (Advanced)	5%	10%
Control	C2 (Proficient)	0%	2%
Experimental	A1 (Beginner)	5%	2%
Experimental	A2 (Elementary)	10%	8%
Experimental	B1 (Intermediate)	50%	45%
Experimental	B2 (Upper Intermediate)	25%	30%
Experimental	C1 (Advanced)	10%	12%
Experimental	C2 (Proficient)	0%	3%

After the intervention, the percentage of A1 students in the control and intervention groups reduced to 3% and 2%, respectively. The percentage of A2 and B1 students also fell to 10% and 50% in the control group and 8% and 45% in the intervention group, respectively. The post-intervention percentages of upper intermediate, advanced, and proficient EFL learners became higher, by contrast (25%,

10% and 2% in the control group and 30%, 12%, and 3% in the intervention group, respectively). As can be seen, EFL learners who took the proposed course exhibited more significant improvement than those exposed to the standard training program. This finding suggests that the proposed course was effective in improving ELP. Thus, English teachers should consider integrating culture-related learning materials into the curriculum to enhance language acquisition and skill development among students.

Discussions

The study's results confirm the key role of cultural heritage in shaping pedagogical approaches in art education. In particular, the integration of heritage elements into the curriculum contributes to the preservation of traditions and the development of creative competencies in students. Similar conclusions are found in the studies of Le (2023), who emphasizes the importance of creative thinking in digital arts, and Hao (2022), who focuses on the formation of cultural identity through education in China. However, other authors, such as Noushad (2024), believe that traditional methods do not always meet modern educational challenges, calling for a rethinking of educational goals.

Despite the agreement with most authors in preserving traditions, our results differ from those of Li et al. (2021), who emphasize the dominance of hybrid pedagogical approaches over traditional ones. Our study underscores the importance of combining traditional methods and modern technologies harmoniously. For example, using digital platforms, such as Google Arts & Culture, ensures interactive learning and helps to increase the interest of young people. In addition, the results point to the growing role of virtual museums and the metaverse in promoting heritage, as confirmed by Buragohain et al. (2024). However, as Mladenović (2023) shows, introducing digital technologies requires considering the local context, especially in regions with poor internet access.

A limitation of our study is the lack of an in-depth analysis of the impact of educational initiatives on students' formation of intercultural competence. For example, Rajaram's (2023) study shows that such initiatives are key in multicultural societies. Further research should focus on analyzing the long-term impact of cultural heritage integration on the professional development of graduates.

The gradual maturity of new media technologies has profoundly impacted the cultural knowledge landscape, with far-reaching consequences for the cultural heritage education industry (Museus et al., 2018). Some researchers claim that educational institutions can optimize the teaching of artistic concepts and influence

the psychological profile of the classroom through the systematic development of culture-related and mental health activities (Zheng et al., 2022). The current study did not examine the psychological aspect of intercultural competence but shed light on intercultural interaction and its five dimensions.

With a comprehensive understanding of traditional culture, students can make clear an important portion of culture-related learning experiences. With that in mind, some scholars integrated traditional cultural education into college teaching (Tianfan, 2019). In the period of social transformation, college education plays an important role in promoting students' cultural self-confidence through the spiritual guidance of traditional culture (Warren, 2018). Their findings suggest that teachers can effectively form a good teaching effect on traditional culture and mother tongue through a deep understanding of traditional culture and related traditional cultural systems, core ideas, values, and concepts.

In some other studies, traditional cultural elements were integrated into other professional courses, such as English, history, and art (Richards, 2022), allowing students to gain professional knowledge and broaden it by understanding traditional cultural content. The results show the effectiveness of cultural content integration in promoting language proficiency and intercultural competence.

Some researchers examined the effects of studying abroad and telecollaboration on developing intercultural communicative competence (Qodriani & Kardiansyah, 2018). Unlike the on-campus group, students engaged in online interactions or study-abroad programs exhibited significant improvement in perceived cognitive, affective (engagement and confidence), and behavioral aspects of intercultural communication competence over time (Lee & Song, 2019). These findings are consistent with the results of the current study. One pedagogically effective teaching model for traditional cultural education involves integrating interactive virtual reality into technology-based learning (Lin & Wang, 2018). The 3D virtual world creates a graphic, vivid, immersive context for students to learn traditional culture. This study used two mobile apps, i.e., Google Arts & Culture and YouVisit, as interactive mediums for cultural education.

Conclusions

The proposed course of traditional English culture yielded positive effects on different dimensions of IC, including knowledge, affective orientation, self-efficacy, behavioral performance, and display of intercultural consciousness. The intercultural knowledge score in the control group improved by 2.68 points ($d = 0.59$), whereas the intervention group had an intercultural knowledge score gain of 4.03 points ($d = 0.72$).

The intervention resulted in the language proficiency level becoming higher in both groups. Students who took the proposed course exhibited slightly more significant improvement in ELP than those who received standard training. This finding suggests that integrating traditional cultural content into the language learning curriculum is beneficial to the development of language proficiency.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to bridge the gap between theoretical discourse and practical application in intercultural education. This study contributes to the growing empirical research on effective pedagogical techniques that enhance intercultural competence. The present findings have important implications for language education, highlighting the effect of cultural content integration on students' readiness to communicate and interact effectively in diverse cultural contexts. The key takeaway is that with digital technologies and access to cultural artefacts, educators can offer immersive learning experiences that promote both language proficiency and cultural understanding among students, enhancing their intercultural communication skills.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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