



Developing Chinese Prospective EFL Teachers' NCA: A Qualitative Approach

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

Improving the Native Cultural Awareness (NCA) of EFL teachers is one of the important challenges facing higher education institutions in China. To give insights in this problem, based on the Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) theory, this study investigated and analyzed how to develop prospective English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' NCA. Specifically, this paper recruited 70 Prospective EFL teachers from a university in China to conduct a six-week qualitative study. Non-numerical data related to semi-structured interviews and topic writing were collected and qualitatively analyzed using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. The results show that "Native Cultural Sensitivity" and "Key Native Cultural Awareness" play an important role in prospective EFL teachers' NCA. This paper uncovers specific changes in cultural critical awareness due to the training, providing valuable guidance for enhancing the cultural critical competence of prospective EFL teachers. Moreover, this paper also provides crucial insights for fostering a more sensitive understanding and response to native culture among prospective EFL teachers.

Keywords: Higher Education, Native Culture Awareness, Across-Cultural Teaching

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the number of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers has increased dramatically in line with China's growing economy and internationalization. However, there is also a trade-off between "quantity" and "quality" in the training of these EFL teachers. Recently, the Chinese government has expressed concern about "Chinese cultural aphasia". This term represents the inadequacy of EFL teachers trained in China in communicating traditional Chinese culture to foreign audiences.

And it is not only in China that this phenomenon is reflected. The Council of Ministers of the European Commission issued a document as early as 1984, emphasizing the importance of EFL teachers' participation in intercultural communication. Intercultural exchange, for EFL teachers, not only promotes the understanding of the local culture during the exchange, but also further grasps the uniqueness of other cultures (Su, 2008; Zhang & Wang, 2020).

Currently, EFL teachers in China are mainly trained by teacher-training universities, and after graduation they enter schools at all levels (primary, secondary or university) to take up teaching duties. And while these teacher training schools play an important role in China's internationalization, they also face corresponding challenges (Wen & Zhang, 2020). One of these is how to develop Native Cultural Awareness (NCA) in prospective EFL teachers. Despite the fact that these higher education institutions are now actively encouraging prospective EFL teachers to participate in international activities, such as Confucius Institutes, to promote Chinese culture, the related problems have not been well resolved.

One of the main reasons for this is the lack of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) among these prospective EFL teachers. Since the 1960s, the ICC has shed light on various research topics related to cultural

awareness (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Kural and Bayyurt, 2016). Recently, there has been a growing research focus on 'cultural aphasia' and issues pertaining to the promotion of native culture and cross-cultural understanding, gaining significant attention in the academic community (Meng, 2019). Researchers are now exploring native culture through the lens of cross-cultural communication. However, there is a noticeable lack of works using multiple methods to collect qualitative data for in-depth analyses of local culture and cross-cultural understanding. This gap has led to limited empirical evidence on local cultural awareness, resulting in a widening gap between research and practice.

To study how to improve the NCA of these prospective EFL teachers from the ICC perspective, this paper recruited 70 Prospective EFL teachers from a university in China to conduct a six-week qualitative study. Non-numerical data related to semi-structured interviews and topic writing were collected and qualitatively analyzed using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. Specifically, drawing on L2 learning experiences as described by Dörnyei (2019) and fostering teachers' awareness of their native culture, the study seeks to enhance cross-cultural awareness and provide valuable guiding principles for crosscultural teaching. The development of these cross-cultural transferable skills has long been a significant research topic.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Intercultural Communication Competence

Various works have conceptualized ICC grounded in the principles of cultural communication. Since the 1980s, the concept of ICC has attracted the attention of researchers, especially the three basic dimensions of emotion, cognition, and skills. In this literature, Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (1986, 1993, 2004), the adaptation model (Berry, 2003), the two-way interaction model (Byram, 2006), and the pyramid model (Deardorff, 2006), has been widely used. The development of various theoretical models of ICC that incorporate Chinese characteristics has also received much attention (see Gu (2016) for a comprehensive review).

According to Deardorff (2006), ICC is the capability of an individual to communicate effectively in intercultural settings. The effectiveness of communication hinges on the level of intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitude possessed by an individual. And Xue (2014) further elaborated on the importance of developing the ICC concept.

Conscious awareness signifies both ICC sensitivity and critical cultural awareness. At the heart of ICC awareness lies critical cultural awareness, defined as "the ability to evaluate critically" (Byram, 1997). This core component governs an individual's capacity to discern and interpret both explicit and implicit values embedded in documents and events.

Intercultural awareness encompasses a set of skills designed to enhance students' awareness of their native culture and facilitate the interpretation and understanding of other cultures. Baker (2012) defined intercultural awareness as follows: "Intercultural awareness is a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices, and frames of understanding play in intercultural communication, along with the ability to apply these concepts flexibly and context-specifically in real-time communication."

Critical cultural awareness is conceptualized as "the ability to critically evaluate perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries based on explicit criteria" (Byram, 1997). Facione (1990) emphasized that critical thinking aids in identifying one's purpose and guides selfregulatory judgmental behavior. Critical thinking facilitates the interpretation, analysis, and evaluation of data and situations, contributing to the conceptual, methodological, and contextual analysis upon which conclusions are drawn.

Kramsch (1993) thought the overarching goal of cultural education is to integrate concepts from both the home and foreign cultures into the training program, facilitating mutual understanding for double-directional learners. This process can contribute to the fusion of two distinct cultures, thereby preventing the proliferation of individuals mimicking native behavior.

2.2 Native Cultural Awareness

Native culture, also referred to as mother-tongue culture, is a subject explored by researchers from various dimensions and through diverse methodologies. Yadav (2014) emphasizes that a thorough understanding of mother-tongue culture not only aids students in mastering foreign cultures but also enhances their comprehension of national culture.

"Cultural Aphasia" is a common phenomenon observed at the school level, often resulting in silence in the classroom and reflecting a negative attitude among students. Existing studies have investigated in depth the emergence of "cultural aphasia" from the perspective of intercultural communication. Meng (2019) suggested that the lack of cultural awareness in the native language, suitable teaching materials and appropriate teacher training modules are important reasons. And Yang (2018) analyzed the collected data and reported that English professional students were deficient in Chinese cultural awareness.

Native cultural understanding is closely related to cultural confidence, and therefore it is crucial to improve students' cultural confidence. By increasing cultural confidence, it helps students to develop their core competencies and identify the strengths and weaknesses of different cultures. In addition, it improves teachers' ability to respond effectively to culture shock (Forbes and Skamp, 2016). Meng (2020) highlights that heightened cultural consciousness among teachers, coupled with their capability to address negative language

transfer, enables them to guide students in developing a stronger identity with their mother-tongue culture. Furthermore, teachers can cultivate a tolerant cultural attitude in students exposed to intercultural settings (Meng, 2020). Well-trained teachers play a pivotal role in enhancing students' ability to respect and appreciate different cultures. Students taught by proficient teachers are more likely to treat diverse cultures equally. This, in turn, contributes to strengthening national and cultural confidence, fostering patriotism among students (Meng, 2020).

For an extended period, curricula have primarily emphasized enhancing students' language skills and knowledge transfer. Researchers now recognize the significance of shifting attention towards fostering cultural confidence. The National Education Conference held in China in 2018 underscored the importance of integrating "Morality Education" into curricula covering ideological, moral, cultural, and social education. This integration is envisioned not only to enhance students' cultural confidence but also to contribute to the development of a stronger sense of discipline among them.

As evident from the above, most researchers have predominantly approached the study of native cultural awareness from a theoretical perspective, with limited empirical investigations conducted on the topic. The research participants have mainly centered around university or college students and EFL teachers. Hence, there is a need to expand the sample space and undertake practical studies on native cultural awareness to enhance the levels of cultural confidence among both students and teachers. Such efforts can significantly contribute to an overall improvement in the cultural confidence of the country.

To date, limited research has been done on the native cultural awareness of prospective EFL teachers. This study analyzes the native cultural awareness of prospective EFL teachers, offering valuable insights and recommendations for cross-cultural teaching.

2.3 Research Questions & Contributions

To address the identified research gap, this paper seeks to answer the following two research questions:

RQ1: Will there be a shift in the cultural critical awareness of Chinese prospective EFL teachers because of cultural awareness training? If so, what are the nature and extent of these changes?

RQ2: Will there be a transformation in the native cultural sensitivity of Chinese prospective EFL teachers following cultural awareness training? If so, what are the specific modifications observed?

Through addressing the aforementioned two research questions, the research contributions of this paper can be summarized into two key points:

- 1) **Revelation of Changes in Cultural Critical Awareness:** This study delves into the impact of cultural awareness training on the cultural critical awareness of prospective EFL teachers in China, offering substantive insights to the field. It uncovers specific changes in cultural critical awareness due to the training, providing valuable guidance for enhancing the cultural critical competence of prospective EFL teachers.
- 2) **Analysis of Transformation in Native Cultural Sensitivity:** By examining the influence of cultural awareness training on the native cultural sensitivity of Chinese prospective EFL teachers, this paper makes a notable contribution to the realm of native cultural awareness. In-depth analysis of changes in native cultural sensitivity provides crucial insights for fostering a more sensitive understanding and response to native culture among prospective EFL teachers.

3. Methodology

In this study, we organized an on-site 6-week cultural workshop series tailored specifically for prospective EFL teachers. Within this series, a specialized English reinforcement course titled 'Lions, Tigers, and Bears' was included, with the aim of familiarizing EFL teachers with Central Park in New York. Throughout the course duration, prospective EFL teachers were tasked with completing specific assignments before, during, and after each class session. Figure 1 provides a detailed illustration of the research process in this paper.

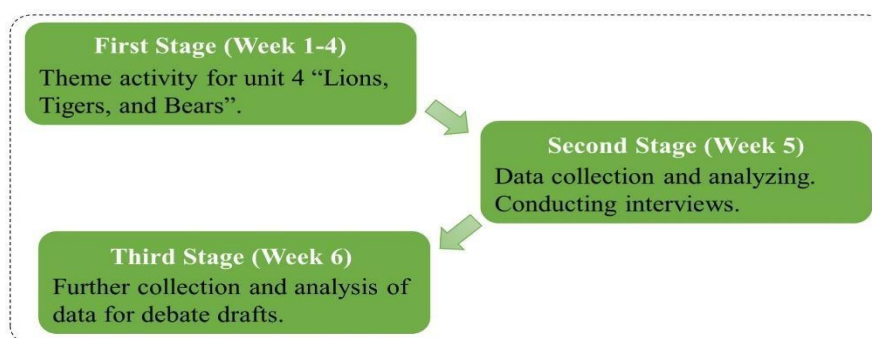


Figure 1. The procedure followed to conduct the survey

Participants Description. The study participants comprised 70 prospective EFL teachers randomly selected from Hebei Normal University in China. These individuals voluntarily enrolled in a 6-week program

emphasizing localized cultural awareness training workshops. All 70 prospective EFL teachers expressed their willingness to participate at the project's outset. Based on demographic information, 66 of the EFL teachers were female, while the remaining 4 were male. All 70 prospective EFL teachers completed the program courses and tasks as planned and participated in semi-structured interviews.

Instruments. Based on the written manuscripts and interview transcripts collected from prospective EFL teachers, this paper thematically coded and analyzed using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. NVivo is a powerful qualitative analysis tool that is adept at working with various forms of unstructured data, including text, images, audio, and video. By quickly identifying similarities in data, it helps to classify and organize it for efficient analysis. Figure 2 shows the process of using Nvivo software in this study.

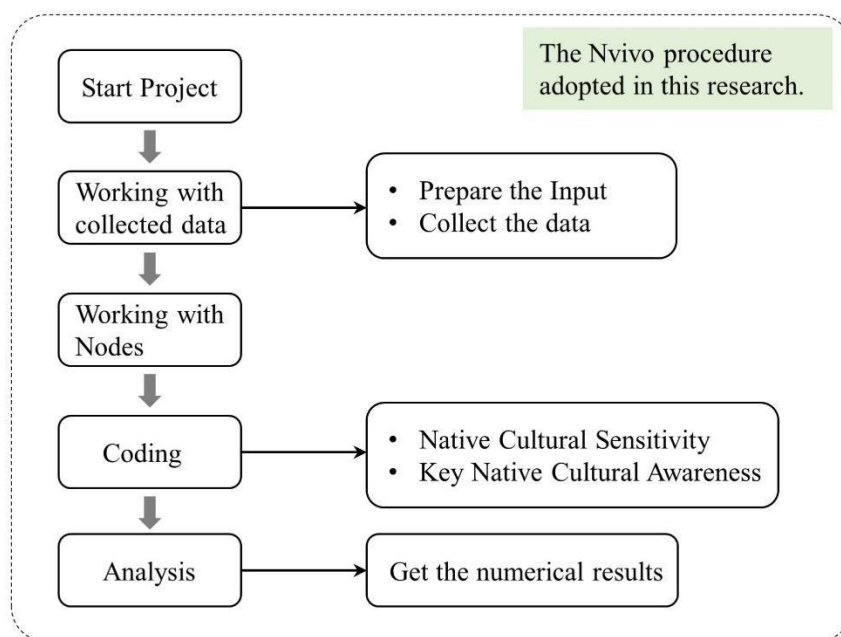


Figure 2. The Nvivo procedure adopted in this research

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 Data Collection & Analysis

All voluntary participants completed a questionnaire at the initiation of the project, providing demographic information and expressing their willingness to participate. Data included written drafts and semi-structured interview contents. The written drafts were derived from the project training sessions, while semi-structured interviews were conducted post-completion of the entire project with six prospective EFL teachers. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, based on the participants' preferences, and were recorded with their consent.

Table 1. Native Culture Sensitivity

Intercultural Sensitivity DMIS (Bennet, 1993)	Cultural Sensitivity	Native Cultural Sensitivity in this study
Denial	Self-respect (Affirmation of selfworth)	It is believed that learning the text is equivalent to learning the target language culture, and there is no need to consider the existence of native culture.
Defense	Self-monitoring (Find out the changes in the environment and use it to correct your behavior)	I think the target-language culture is the best, and I sharply criticize the native culture.
Minimization	Open minds (Willing to explain own thoughts and behaviors, and willing to understand and interact with each other)	It is found that the target-language culture is similar to the native culture.

Acceptance	Empathy yourself (Visualize in others' shoes)	I can accept cultural differences and be respectful toward similar native cultures while facing the target language culture.
Adaptation	Interactive input (Respond to/focus on perceptions while communicating)	I think the native culture in the target language culture can be viewed from different perspectives.
Integration	Suspend judgments (Make no rash conclusions or judgments about matters)	When I encounter cases, I can think calmly and dialectically about cultural differences.

Thematic analysis with descriptive coding was applied to analyze the debate texts of the six teachers. The same codes were employed for thematically analyzing and comparing textual content. A 'new code' was generated to encompass all potential themes, and sub-themes were established for 'Native Cultural Sensitivity' (see Table 1) and 'Key Native Cultural Awareness' (see Table 2). The visualization features of the NVivo software facilitated the identification of relevant themes and the merging of similar discourses. Finally, the research findings were explored based on the results of the data analysis.

4.2 First Stage (Week 1-4)

The coding results unveiled three pivotal thematic points: Minimization (highlighting minimal differences between the target language culture and native culture, emphasizing numerous similarities), Acceptance (demonstrating the ability to embrace cultural differences with curiosity and respect toward native culture when encountering the target language culture), and Adaptation (displaying the capacity

Table 2. Key Native Cultural Awareness

Critical cultural awareness (Facione, 2013)	Five cognitive criteria	Five emotional criteria	Critical Native Cultural Awareness in this study
Interpretation	Clarity, relevance, logic, profundity, flexibility	Curiosity, openness, confidence, integrity, perseverance	Should be able to understand native cultural values and objectively describe native culture.
Analysis			Should be able to fully understand the native culture and analyze the causes of cultural differences.
Conclusion			Should be able to summarize the reasons behind the differences.
Evaluation			Should be able to evaluate the native culture objectively.
Explanation			Should be able to introduce and spread native culture in English.
Selfarrangement			When facing cultural differences, individuals should possess the ability to objectively and dialectically embrace divergences, introduce local culture to foreign audiences, and effectively narrate and Chinese stories.

to perceive native culture from various perspectives). These three points correspond with the findings of a prior study on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) by Bennet (1993). The model suggests that continuous enhancement of intercultural sensitivity is fostered through training and education. Scholars have observed that 'each stage represents a way of dealing with cultural differences that is quite consistent for individuals at a specific developmental stage' (Bennet, 1993).

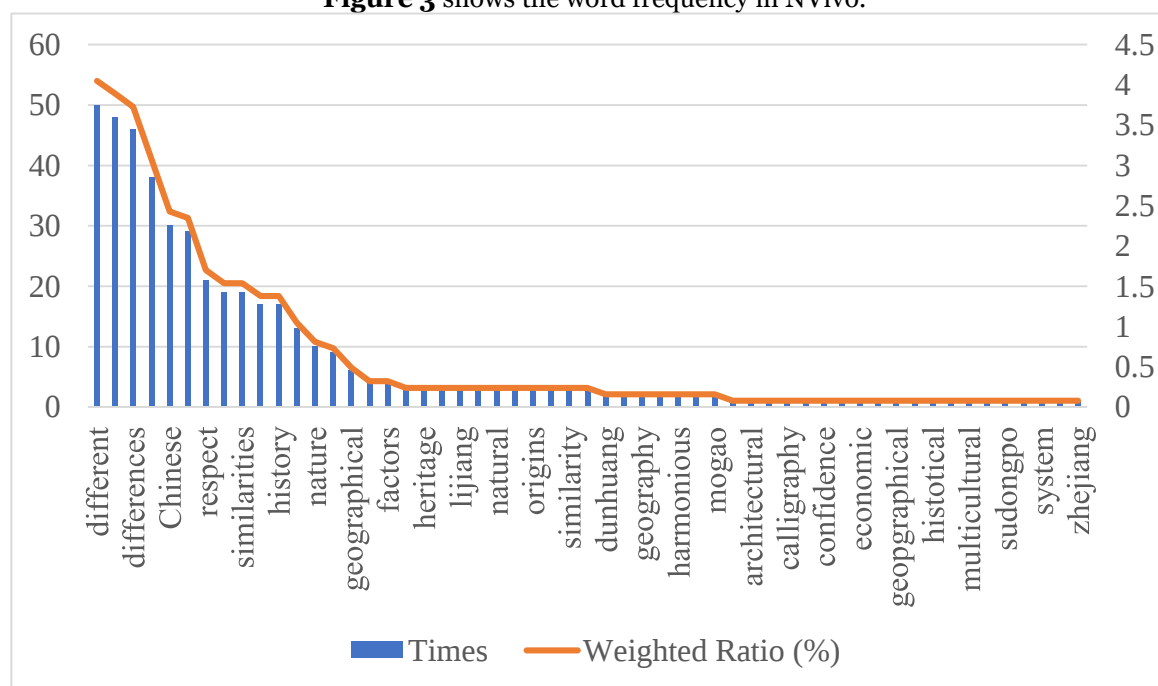
Figure 3 shows the word frequency in NVivo.**Figure 3.** Word Frequency in NVivo

Figure 3 illustrates that the high-frequency terms include "different," "difference," and "similar." Analyzing the parameter "Minimization" (Native Cultural Sensitivity DMIS; Bennet 1993), it can be inferred that prospective EFL teachers perceive minimal differences between the target language culture and their native culture while understanding their similarity. According to Bennet (1993), when considering the theme of "Minimization," elements in an individual's cultural worldview are experienced as universal. Therefore, prospective EFL teachers believe that, despite differences between foreign and native cultures, there are also similarities in certain circumstances. In this context, individuals acknowledge cultural differences but downplay them, asserting that the similarities between the native culture and Western culture outweigh the differences. The terms "**respect**" and "**acceptance**" frequently appear in the text (Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity DMIS; Bennet 1993). And "**empathy**" (consideration for others by putting oneself in their shoes) is also recurrently employed. It can be inferred that prospective EFL teachers can embrace cultural differences, displaying curiosity toward the target language culture, and demonstrating respect for the disparities between Western and Chinese cultures.

The following section presents excerpts from the writings of prospective EFL teachers (the keyword being "**Acceptance**"):

"Chinese and Western scenic spots are different. Although cultural variations exist, we must absorb the essence and discard the dregs. We should respect differences."

"Whatever the causes, we must respect cultural similarities and differences observed among different countries and parts of the same country."

"Although there are many differences between Chinese and American cultures, we should respect each other's culture and appreciate and absorb the good in other cultures. We should critically analyze foreign culture and not blindly advocate foreign culture."

The following section presents excerpts from the writings of prospective EFL teachers (the keyword being "**Adaptation**"):

"Different geographical locations make for different landscapes. Hence, the two countries have unique landscapes. Different histories make for different sceneries. Hence, different Chinese scenery in different places always represents different historical events."

"There are many reasons for cultural differences. Every country has different historical and cultural backgrounds, origins, preferences, thinking patterns, and needs of the masses."

In some cases, few expressions related to **Denial**, **Defense**, and **Integration** frequently appeared in the writings. The tutor incorporated three elements (**Denial**, **Defense**, and **Integration**) into several questions for a detailed analysis of native cultural awareness, and the results are presented in 4.2 the second stage. The purpose of this survey was to understand the critical native cultural awareness of the teachers. Therefore, the tutor designed the question, "When you learn about the culture of the target language in the future, will you be able to associate it with the native culture and think about the similarities and differences between the cultures?" Only a few prospective EFL teachers provided examples through native stories, such as the stories of Dunhuang (located in the Hexi corridor, is one of the four towns of Hexi in history, a nationally famous historical and cultural city, has a history of more than 2000 years), Fuzhou (the capital and the largest

prefecture-level city of Fujian province, and also referred to as Rongcheng which means "city of banyan trees."), Mogao (the world art treasure house and the greatest existing Buddhist art treasure of the world), calligraphy (is understood in China as the art of line with the brush or the study of the rules and techniques of this art.), Sudongpo (A Chinese writer and poet Su Shi lived from AD 1037 to 1101), Suzhou (an ancient town located between Shanghai), and Xihu (is famous for many places of interest and the best among them). No more than ten people out of the 70 participants presented native stories. Thus, it is necessary to train the teachers so that they can spread the native culture worldwide.

4.3 Second Stage (Week 5)

The researcher conducted interviews with several prospective EFL teachers to validate previous research findings. According to the interview results, they unanimously asserted that appreciating English reading texts is a manifestation of absorbing the target language culture. Throughout the process of appreciating English reading texts, they did not engage with texts related to topics associated with their native culture. This outcome aligns with the findings of the first phase. Additionally, the researcher posed seven questions consistent with the themes of cross-cultural sensitivity DMIS (Bennett, 1993) and critical cultural awareness (Facione, 2013). The specific questions are detailed in the following sections (we highlight the most important parts due to the space limitation).

Denial. The tutor conducted interviews and asked, "**While learning the language, did you think of the natural sceneries and customs in China?**" This was a yes or no question, and all the prospective EFL teachers stated that they did not think of the natural sceneries and native customs in China while learning the language. They expressed a positive attitude, consistent with the findings presented in the first stage. The prospective EFL teachers believed that learning the text was equivalent to getting accustomed to the target language culture.

Defence. The tutor conducted interviews and asked, "Do you prefer the natural sceneries and customs of the United States of America over those of China? Give reasons behind your answer." The keywords that appeared in the writings of the six prospective EFL teachers are presented in Figure 4. The result can be explained by the keyword "Self-monitoring" (identifying the environmental changes and using the results to correct your behavior).

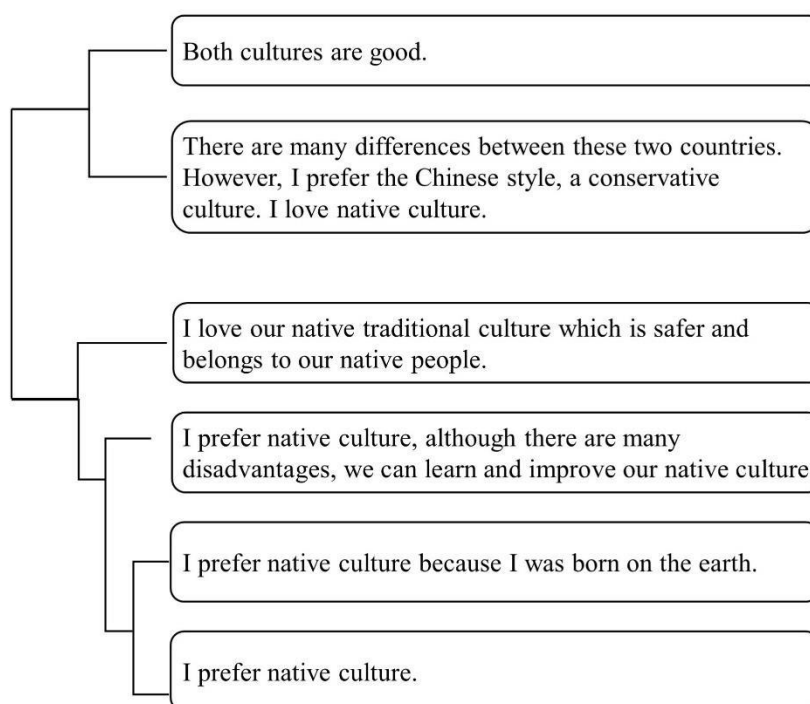


Figure 4. Themes identified using NVivo for native cultural awareness from items clustered based on word similarity

Minimization. The tutor conducted interviews and designed the question, "**What are the similarities and differences between the natural sceneries and local customs of the two countries?**" Most of the teachers attributed the differences to historical differences. One of the teachers highlighted the differences in the state system of the two countries, and one teacher pointed out that "connectional differences between different thinkers played an important role in the design of parks." The results presented in Figure 4 also reveal the views of the prospective EFL teachers.

Acceptance. The tutor conducted interviews and designed the question, "**Following the learning of the text, what is your attitude toward the native cultural tasks assigned by the teacher?**" The

prospective EFL teachers actively participated in the tasks or activities guided by the tutor. It could be concluded that the prospective EFL teachers exhibited positive attitudes toward native excellent cultures and were ready to notice the nuances and uniqueness of culture. They could take the initiative to adjust to changing circumstances. When the prospective EFL teachers were appropriately instructed by the tutor, their views and thoughts were changed. The prospective EFL teachers realized that being aware of the native culture could aid in the learning and assimilation of foreign cultures.

4.4 Third Stage (Week 6)

The mentor encourages prospective EFL teachers to participate in debates to enhance their critical thinking abilities. The chosen topic for the debate is 'For a society to cohere, besides unity and discipline, there must also be a strong consensus among members.' To elevate the critical native cultural awareness of prospective EFL teachers, the mentor analyzed the drafts submitted during the debate and conducted an analysis of the stories and examples cited. According to observations, prospective EFL teachers predominantly utilized indigenous narratives to support their viewpoints. By the fourth week, teachers were able to articulate their perspectives objectively, contributing to the cultivation of their ability to convey exemplary local culture. This approach fosters the teachers' capacity to disseminate indigenous cultural nuances effectively.

The coding results revealed three keywords: interpretation (indicating the ability to understand and objectively describe native culture), evaluation (indicating the ability to objectively evaluate native culture), and explanation (indicating the ability to introduce and disseminate native culture in English).

The results indicated that among the 70 drafts submitted, over 50 incorporated native stories to illustrate the teachers' opinions. This highlights the prospective EFL teachers' ability to objectively describe native stories. As noted by Byram (1997), critical cultural awareness can be understood as "an ability to evaluate critically."

The native cultural awareness of the prospective EFL teachers showed significant improvement, with the recorded degree of awareness in this stage surpassing that of the second stage. This was evident in the teachers predominantly incorporating native stories into their writings. As highlighted by Meng (2020), achieving cultural consciousness and addressing negative language transfer is advantageous. These aspects can assist students in developing a cultural identity for their mother tongue and foster a tolerant attitude in intercultural communication contexts. This, in turn, enhances students' ability to understand and appreciate diverse cultures, treat different cultures equally, and ultimately boosts their confidence while instilling a sense of patriotism.

Six aspects (interpretation, analysis, conclusion, evaluation, explanation, and self-arrangement) were considered in studying critical cultural awareness (Facione 2013). The teachers demonstrated the ability to understand and objectively describe native cultural knowledge. Most of them could objectively analyze situations and identify the similarities and differences between different cultures. Importantly, they exhibited a willingness to accept differences, disseminate local culture, and narrate Chinese stories in English.

The Higher Education Steering Committee of the Ministry of Education (2018) has emphasized that English is an integral part of humanistic education. While teaching English, it is essential to enhance the cultural confidence and professional ethics of teachers to inspire students to narrate Chinese stories in English. This contributes to spreading China's voice globally and enhancing the country's image.

Achieving this goal enables the presentation of foreign stories from a Chinese perspective.

5. Conclusion

Improving the NCA of EFL teachers is one of the important challenges facing higher education institutions in China. Although many attempts and reforms have been made, the lack of ICC ability of EFL teachers is still the key to the problem.

To solve the above issues, this study uses qualitative analysis method to explore how to improve the NCA of prospective EFL teachers in China. We recruited 70 future EFL teachers from a university in China to conduct a six-week qualitative study. Non-numerical data related to semi-structured interviews and topic writing were collected and qualitatively analyzed using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. The results shows that "Native Cultural Sensitivity" and "Key Native Cultural Awareness" play an important role in prospective EFL teachers' NCA.

This study delves into the impact of cultural awareness training on the cultural critical awareness of prospective EFL teachers in China, offering substantive insights to the field. It uncovers specific changes in cultural critical awareness due to the training, providing valuable guidance for enhancing the cultural critical competence of prospective EFL teachers. Moreover, this paper also provides crucial insights for fostering a more sensitive understanding and response to native culture among prospective EFL teachers.

One of the limitations of this study is the lack of quantitative data on EFL teachers' NCA. Future research can provide new research insights through quantitative analysis.

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