

## Language Learning Through a Cultural Lens: Assessing the Benefits of Cultural Understanding in Language Education



Dang Thi Kim Chung<sup>1</sup>, Nguyen Thanh Long<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Dai Nam University, Hanoi, Vietnam

**ABSTRACT:** This study, titled "Language Learning through a Cultural Lens: Assessing the Benefits of Cultural Understanding in Language Education," investigates the role of cultural understanding in the language acquisition process among fourth-year English majors. Utilizing a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 12 participants. The findings reveal that cultural exposure through media, interactions with native speakers, and study materials significantly enhances motivation, contextual understanding, and language proficiency. Participants emphasized the importance of integrating cultural content into language curricula, noting that such integration makes learning more engaging and relevant. However, challenges in understanding subtle cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions highlight the need for targeted support. The practical benefits of cultural understanding were evident in students' real-world interactions, underscoring its value beyond the classroom. This study concludes that incorporating cultural understanding into language education is essential for effective language learning and real-world communication, and it recommends further exploration of specific teaching methods and materials to enhance cultural competence in language learners.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural understanding, Language learning, English language education, Cultural exposure

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. *The growing importance of language learning in a globalized world*

In today's interconnected global society, the ability to communicate across cultural and linguistic boundaries has become increasingly vital. Globalization, characterized by the rapid exchange of information, goods, and services across borders, necessitates proficiency in multiple languages to facilitate effective communication and collaboration (Crystal, 2012). Language learning is no longer merely a tool for personal enrichment but a crucial skill for participating in the global economy and fostering international understanding.

One of the primary drivers of the importance of language learning is the need for businesses to operate in diverse linguistic environments. As companies expand their operations internationally, the demand for employees who can communicate in multiple languages has surged. This linguistic capability enables businesses to enter new markets, negotiate with international partners, and provide customer service to a global clientele (Grin, Sfreddo, & Vaillancourt, 2010).

Moreover, language learning promotes cultural awareness and sensitivity, which are essential in navigating the complexities of global interactions. Understanding the cultural context behind a language helps individuals build stronger relationships and avoid misunderstandings that can arise from cultural differences (Byram, 1997; Risager, 2018). This cultural competence is especially important in diplomatic, educational, and multicultural settings where effective communication can lead to more productive and harmonious interactions.

The educational sector has also recognized the growing importance of language learning. Institutions worldwide are incorporating language programs into their curricula to prepare students for global citizenship. Language skills enhance students' academic and career prospects by providing them with the tools needed to engage with diverse perspectives and contribute to global discussions (Duff & Anderson, 2015). Additionally, bilingual and multilingual individuals often exhibit cognitive benefits, such as improved problem-solving abilities and greater mental flexibility (Bialystok, 2009).

In summary, the growing importance of language learning in a globalized world is driven by the need for effective communication in international business, the promotion of cultural understanding, and the preparation of individuals for participation in a global society. As globalization continues to advance, the ability to speak multiple languages will remain a critical asset, facilitating cross-cultural connections and fostering a more interconnected world.

## Language Learning Through a Cultural Lens: Assessing the Benefits of Cultural Understanding in Language Education

### 1.2. Overview of the role of culture in language learning

Culture plays a pivotal role in language learning, influencing both the acquisition process and the effectiveness of communication. Understanding the cultural context in which a language is used provides learners with deeper insights into linguistic nuances, social norms, and pragmatic uses of the language. This connection between language and culture is well-documented and underscores the importance of integrating cultural awareness into language education (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 2013).

#### *Cultural Context and Meaning*

Language is deeply embedded in culture, and cultural knowledge is essential for interpreting meaning accurately. Words and phrases often carry cultural connotations that can vary significantly across different societies. For example, idiomatic expressions, humor, and metaphors are typically culture-specific and may not make sense without an understanding of the underlying cultural context (Kramsch, 2013). This cultural knowledge helps learners avoid misinterpretations and use the language more naturally and appropriately.

#### *Intercultural Communicative Competence*

Developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is crucial for language learners, as it enables them to interact effectively and appropriately with speakers from different cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997). ICC involves not only linguistic proficiency but also an understanding of cultural norms, values, and behaviors. Language learners with high ICC can navigate cross-cultural interactions with greater ease, demonstrating respect and sensitivity to cultural differences (Deardorff, 2006).

#### *Cultural Immersion and Language Proficiency*

Cultural immersion is one of the most effective ways to enhance language proficiency. Immersion experiences, such as studying abroad or engaging with native speakers, provide learners with authentic contexts for language use, exposing them to the cultural subtleties of communication (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This immersion helps learners develop a more intuitive grasp of the language, including its sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects.

#### *Educational Approaches to Integrating Culture*

Incorporating cultural content into language education can significantly enhance learning outcomes. Educators can use culturally relevant materials, such as films, literature, and real-life scenarios, to provide context and stimulate interest (Risager, 2018). Additionally, discussions about cultural differences and similarities can foster critical thinking and intercultural awareness among students (Baker, 2015).

#### *Challenges and Considerations*

While integrating culture into language education offers numerous benefits, it also presents challenges. Teachers need to be culturally competent themselves and aware of the diversity within the target culture to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or biases (Matsuda, 2017). Additionally, curricula must be carefully designed to balance linguistic goals with cultural education, ensuring that neither aspect is neglected.

In conclusion, culture is an integral component of language learning, shaping how learners understand and use the language. By fostering cultural awareness and intercultural competence, educators can enhance the overall effectiveness of language instruction and prepare learners for meaningful communication in a globalized world.

### 1.3. Problem Statement

Despite substantial research highlighting the interplay between language and culture, a significant gap remains in understanding the specific mechanisms through which cultural awareness impacts language acquisition. While it is well established that cultural competence enhances communicative effectiveness (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 2013), the precise ways in which cultural knowledge facilitates language learning processes are not fully understood.

One critical gap lies in the need for empirical studies that directly link cultural awareness to measurable improvements in language proficiency. Existing research often emphasizes theoretical frameworks and qualitative observations without providing robust quantitative data to support the connection between cultural understanding and language acquisition outcomes (Baker, 2015; Deardorff, 2006). This lack of quantitative evidence limits the ability to generalize findings and develop effective pedagogical strategies.

Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research exploring the diverse cultural contexts and their unique impacts on language learning. Most studies have focused on specific language-culture pairs, primarily within Western contexts, thus neglecting the diverse cultural backgrounds of learners globally (Risager, 2018). This oversight restricts the applicability of findings across different cultural settings and diminishes the potential to address the needs of learners from varied cultural backgrounds.

Additionally, there is limited understanding of how cultural awareness interacts with other cognitive and affective factors in language learning. For instance, how does cultural knowledge influence motivation, anxiety, and attitudes toward the target language? Exploring these intersections could provide a more comprehensive picture of the role of cultural awareness in language acquisition (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

In summary, while the importance of cultural awareness in language learning is recognized, the specific impacts and mechanisms remain underexplored. Addressing these gaps through empirical research that incorporates diverse cultural contexts and examines

## Language Learning Through a Cultural Lens: Assessing the Benefits of Cultural Understanding in Language Education

the interaction of cultural awareness with other learning factors will enhance our understanding and inform more effective language teaching practices.

### 1.4. Research Objectives

The objective of this research is to assess the benefits of cultural understanding in language education. Cultural understanding significantly enhances the language learning experience, providing numerous benefits that contribute to more effective and meaningful communication. These benefits can be categorized into several key areas:

#### *Enhanced Communicative Competence*

Cultural understanding improves learners' ability to use the language appropriately in various contexts. Communicative competence involves not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to understand and use language in socially and culturally appropriate ways (Byram, 1997). By integrating cultural knowledge into language learning, students can better interpret idiomatic expressions, humor, and other culturally nuanced aspects of the language, leading to more effective and natural communication (Kramersch, 2013).

#### *Increased Motivation and Engagement*

Cultural content can make language learning more engaging and relevant for students. When learners see the practical applications of their language skills in real-world cultural contexts, their motivation to learn increases (Baker, 2015). Cultural activities, such as exploring traditions, cuisine, and media from the target culture, can spark students' interest and provide a more immersive and enjoyable learning experience (Risager, 2018).

#### *Development of Intercultural Competence*

Intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. This skill is increasingly important in our globalized world, where cross-cultural communication is common in both personal and professional settings (Deardorff, 2006). Language learners who develop intercultural competence are better prepared to navigate cultural differences, reduce misunderstandings, and build positive relationships across cultures.

#### *Cognitive and Critical Thinking Skills*

Engaging with cultural content enhances cognitive skills and critical thinking. Learners must analyze and compare cultural practices, question their assumptions, and reflect on their own cultural perspectives (Byram, 1997). This process of cultural comparison and reflection fosters deeper cognitive engagement and promotes critical thinking skills, which are valuable in all areas of education and beyond (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

#### *Real-World Application and Practical Skills*

Understanding the cultural context of a language provides learners with practical skills that are useful in real-world situations. For instance, knowledge of cultural norms and etiquette can help learners in professional settings, such as international business negotiations or diplomatic interactions (Grin, Sfreddo, & Vaillancourt, 2010). These practical skills enhance learners' ability to use the language effectively in diverse scenarios.

#### *Broader Perspective and Global Awareness*

Learning about different cultures through language education broadens students' perspectives and fosters global awareness. This broader worldview helps learners appreciate cultural diversity and understand global issues more comprehensively (Risager, 2018). By becoming more culturally aware, students can develop empathy and respect for people from different backgrounds, contributing to a more inclusive and interconnected world.

### 1.5. Research Questions

The interplay between cultural understanding and language acquisition is a topic of significant academic interest. This research seeks to delve into the ways in which cultural awareness influences the process of learning a new language. The central research question guiding this study is: ***How does cultural understanding influence language acquisition?***

To explore this question, the study will investigate several key aspects:

- **Cultural Contexts and Meaning-Making:** How does familiarity with the cultural contexts in which a language is used impact the learner's ability to comprehend and produce meaningful communication? This aspect examines whether cultural knowledge helps learners understand idiomatic expressions, social norms, and pragmatic uses of language (Kramersch, 2013).
- **Motivation and Engagement:** In what ways does cultural awareness affect learners' motivation and engagement in the language learning process? This involves exploring how integrating cultural elements into language education can make learning more engaging and relevant for students (Baker, 2015).
- **Intercultural Communicative Competence:** How does cultural understanding contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence among language learners? This question aims to assess the extent to which cultural awareness enhances learners' ability to interact effectively and appropriately with speakers from different cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997).
- **Practical Applications and Real-World Skills:** What practical skills and applications arise from the integration of cultural knowledge in language learning? This includes looking at how cultural competence can improve real-world communication and professional interactions (Deardorff, 2006).

## Language Learning Through a Cultural Lens: Assessing the Benefits of Cultural Understanding in Language Education

By addressing these sub-questions, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the benefits of cultural understanding in language acquisition and to identify effective strategies for incorporating cultural elements into language education. This study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by offering empirical evidence and practical insights into the role of culture in language learning.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *Theories Related to Language Acquisition and Cultural Understanding*

Understanding the relationship between language acquisition and cultural understanding requires a comprehensive examination of key theoretical frameworks. Several theories provide valuable insights into how cultural factors influence the process of learning a new language, including sociocultural theory, intercultural communicative competence, and translingual/transcultural competence.

#### 2.1.1. *Sociocultural Theory*

Sociocultural theory, pioneered by Lev Vygotsky, posits that social interaction and cultural context are fundamental to cognitive development and learning (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory emphasizes that language acquisition is not merely an individual cognitive process but a social one, deeply embedded in cultural contexts. Learners acquire language through meaningful interactions with more knowledgeable others, such as teachers, peers, and community members. These interactions are mediated by cultural tools and symbols, including language itself.

According to Vygotsky, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a critical concept, referring to the difference between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance. Sociocultural theory highlights the importance of scaffolding—support provided by more knowledgeable individuals—to help learners move through their ZPD and acquire new linguistic and cultural knowledge (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This theory underscores the interdependence of social interaction, cultural context, and language learning.

#### 2.1.2. *Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)*

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is a framework that extends beyond linguistic proficiency to include the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural boundaries (Byram, 1997). ICC comprises several components: knowledge of other cultures, attitudes of openness and curiosity, skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness. Byram's model of ICC suggests that language learners need to develop not only linguistic skills but also an understanding of cultural norms, values, and practices. This competence enables learners to navigate cultural differences, reduce misunderstandings, and build positive relationships with speakers from different cultural backgrounds. ICC is particularly relevant in a globalized world where cross-cultural communication is commonplace (Deardorff, 2006).

#### 2.1.3. *Translingual and Transcultural Competence*

Translingual and transcultural competence, as described by Kramsch (2013), focuses on the ability to operate between languages and cultures. This competence involves recognizing the fluidity and hybridity of linguistic and cultural identities. Learners with translingual and transcultural competence can adapt their language use to various cultural contexts, creatively negotiate meaning, and view language learning as an ongoing, dynamic process.

Kramsch emphasizes that language learners should be encouraged to see themselves as cultural mediators who can bridge cultural divides and create new forms of communication. This perspective aligns with the realities of a multilingual and multicultural world, where individuals often navigate multiple linguistic and cultural landscapes.

These theoretical frameworks collectively highlight the integral role of cultural understanding in language acquisition. Sociocultural theory underscores the importance of social interaction and cultural context, while ICC and translingual/transcultural competence emphasize the need for cultural awareness and adaptability. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive foundation for exploring how cultural understanding influences language learning and inform effective pedagogical practices.

### 2.2. *Previous Studies on the relationship between cultural understanding and language learning*

Empirical research has increasingly highlighted the significant impact of cultural understanding on language learning. This body of work encompasses various studies that demonstrate how cultural awareness enhances language acquisition, communicative competence, and learner motivation.

#### 2.1.4. *Cultural Understanding and Communicative Competence*

Research indicates that integrating cultural elements into language instruction significantly improves learners' communicative competence. For instance, Byram and Feng (2004) found that students who participated in intercultural communication courses developed a better understanding of both their own and the target culture, leading to improved language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence. Similarly, a study by Sercu et al. (2005) involving European language learners showed that those who received culturally integrated language instruction were more adept at using language appropriately in various cultural contexts.

#### 2.1.5. *Cultural Awareness and Language Proficiency*

Several studies have examined the direct relationship between cultural understanding and language proficiency. A notable study by Hennebry, Lo, and Macaro (2012) explored the effects of cultural content on secondary school students learning Chinese. The

## Language Learning Through a Cultural Lens: Assessing the Benefits of Cultural Understanding in Language Education

findings revealed that students who engaged with cultural materials showed greater improvement in language skills compared to those who did not. This suggests that cultural exposure enhances not only linguistic knowledge but also contextual understanding, which is crucial for effective communication.

### 2.1.6. *Motivation and Engagement*

Cultural understanding also plays a crucial role in learner motivation and engagement. Liu (2014) conducted a study with Chinese university students learning English, discovering that those who were exposed to cultural aspects of English-speaking countries exhibited higher levels of motivation and engagement in their studies. This increased motivation was linked to a deeper interest in the language and a desire to connect with the culture associated with it.

### 2.1.7. *Intercultural Competence and Language Learning Outcomes*

The development of intercultural competence has been shown to positively affect language learning outcomes. In a study by Peng (2015), university students who participated in intercultural competence training alongside their language courses demonstrated significant improvements in both language skills and cultural awareness. This dual focus on language and culture equipped students with the necessary tools to navigate intercultural communication more effectively.

### 2.1.8. *Cultural Immersion and Authentic Language Use*

Research on cultural immersion programs provides further evidence of the benefits of cultural understanding in language learning. In a study by Wilkinson (2002), American students participating in study abroad programs in Spain reported substantial gains in language proficiency and cultural knowledge. The immersive environment forced students to use the language authentically and adapt to cultural nuances, resulting in a more profound and practical understanding of both the language and culture.

### 2.1.9. *Challenges and Limitations*

While the benefits of cultural understanding in language learning are well-documented, some studies highlight challenges and limitations. For example, Schulz (2007) noted that integrating cultural content into language curricula requires careful planning and teacher training to avoid superficial or stereotypical representations of culture. Additionally, Kinginger (2009) emphasized the need for more longitudinal studies to fully understand the long-term impacts of cultural understanding on language acquisition.

Empirical research consistently supports the positive relationship between cultural understanding and language learning. Studies show that cultural awareness enhances communicative competence, language proficiency, learner motivation, and intercultural competence. However, challenges remain in effectively integrating cultural content into language education. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, particularly through longitudinal and diverse cultural studies, to further elucidate the role of cultural understanding in language acquisition.

## 2.3. *Gaps in the Literature that Need Further Research*

While there is substantial evidence supporting the positive impact of cultural understanding on language learning, several gaps and areas require further exploration to deepen our comprehension of this relationship.

### 2.1.10. *Lack of Longitudinal Studies*

One significant gap in the existing literature is the scarcity of longitudinal studies that track the long-term effects of cultural understanding on language acquisition. Most studies are cross-sectional, providing snapshots of learner experiences at specific points in time. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how cultural awareness impacts language proficiency and intercultural competence over extended periods (Kinging, 2009). Such studies would provide insights into the sustainability of cultural learning benefits and the development of language skills.

### 2.1.11. *Diverse Cultural Contexts*

Much of the research on cultural understanding and language learning has focused on Western contexts or specific language pairs, such as English and French or English and Spanish (Risager, 2018). There is a need for more studies involving diverse cultural contexts and less commonly taught languages. Research in non-Western settings and with languages such as Arabic, Chinese, or indigenous languages can offer a broader perspective and help generalize findings across different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Duff & Anderson, 2015).

### 2.1.12. *Integration of Cultural Content in Curriculum*

Although the benefits of cultural integration in language education are recognized, there is limited empirical evidence on the most effective methods for incorporating cultural content into curricula. More research is needed to identify best practices and develop standardized guidelines for educators (Schulz, 2007). Studies should explore various pedagogical approaches, such as immersive experiences, cultural exchange programs, and the use of multimedia resources, to determine their effectiveness in different educational settings.

### 2.1.13. *Impact on Different Age Groups*

Most existing research focuses on university students or adults learning a second language. There is a gap in understanding how cultural awareness affects language acquisition across different age groups, particularly young children and adolescents (Bialystok, 2009). Investigating the impact of cultural learning in early language education could provide valuable insights into the developmental aspects of intercultural competence and language skills.

## Language Learning Through a Cultural Lens: Assessing the Benefits of Cultural Understanding in Language Education

### 2.1.14. *Interaction with Cognitive and Affective Factors*

The interplay between cultural understanding and other cognitive and affective factors in language learning remains underexplored. For instance, how does cultural knowledge influence learners' anxiety, confidence, and attitudes towards the target language? Examining these interactions can provide a more holistic understanding of the language learning process and inform strategies to support learners' emotional and psychological well-being (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

### 2.1.15. *Technology and Virtual Cultural Immersion*

With the advent of digital technology, virtual cultural immersion has become a viable alternative to physical immersion. However, research on the effectiveness of virtual cultural experiences in language learning is still limited. Studies should investigate how digital platforms and virtual reality can be used to simulate cultural environments and enhance language learning outcomes (O'Dowd, 2020).

Addressing these gaps and areas needing further research will enhance our understanding of the role of cultural understanding in language acquisition. Longitudinal studies, diverse cultural contexts, curriculum integration methods, age-specific impacts, cognitive and affective interactions, and the use of technology are all critical areas for future research. By exploring these dimensions, scholars can develop more comprehensive and effective language education practices that incorporate cultural awareness.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. *Research Design*

The research design for the study "*Language Learning through a Cultural Lens: Assessing the Benefits of Cultural Understanding in Language Education*" involves a qualitative approach to explore the impact of cultural understanding on language acquisition. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with language learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. Participants will be selected using purposive sampling to ensure a range of experiences and perspectives. Thematic analysis will be employed to identify common themes and insights related to how cultural knowledge influences language learning processes and outcomes. Additionally, classroom observations and document analysis of teaching materials will be conducted to triangulate the findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of cultural understanding in language education.

### 3.2. *Participants*

The participants in this study are 12 fourth-year students majoring in English at a university in Vietnam. These students have been selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they possess substantial experience in language learning and have been exposed to various cultural contexts through their academic coursework. The selection criteria include a high level of proficiency in English, completion of at least three years of language study, and active engagement in cultural studies as part of their curriculum. This cohort provides a rich source of data due to their advanced language skills and the depth of their cultural exposure, making them ideal candidates to explore the benefits of cultural understanding in language education.

## IV. FINDINGS

### 4.1. *Impact of Cultural Exposure on Language Learning*

Participants reported that exposure to different cultures through media, interactions with native speakers, and study materials significantly enhanced their motivation and contextual understanding of the English language. Many students shared that watching movies and TV shows from English-speaking countries helped them understand slang and cultural references, making their conversations more natural. This positive influence of cultural exposure was seen as a critical component in their language learning journey.

### 4.2. *Perceptions of Cultural Understanding in Language Learning*

Students believe that cultural understanding is crucial for mastering English, as it provides context and relevance to language use. Knowing about cultural practices and social norms was seen as essential for using the language appropriately in various situations. One participant noted that understanding cultural nuances helped them feel more confident and competent in their English communication.

### 4.3. *Integration of Cultural Topics in the Classroom*

Participants found that lessons incorporating cultural topics were more engaging and helped them better grasp language nuances. They recalled that discussions about festivals, traditions, and everyday life in English-speaking countries were particularly interesting and memorable. This effective incorporation of culture in lessons not only made the classes more enjoyable but also enhanced the overall learning experience.

### 4.4. *Contribution of Cultural Content to Language Skills*

Students noted improvements in specific language skills, particularly speaking and listening, through exposure to cultural content. Role-playing different cultural scenarios in class was highlighted as a particularly effective method for building confidence in using

## Language Learning Through a Cultural Lens: Assessing the Benefits of Cultural Understanding in Language Education

English in real-world situations. This enhanced language skills through cultural content demonstrates the practical benefits of integrating cultural understanding into language education.

### 4.5. *Challenges in Understanding Cultural Aspects*

Participants mentioned challenges in understanding subtle cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions, which sometimes led to misunderstandings. Despite their efforts, many students found it difficult to grasp the deeper meanings of some idioms and jokes due to their strong cultural ties. These difficulties underscore the need for more targeted support in navigating cultural complexities within language learning.

### 4.6. *Benefits of Cultural Understanding Beyond the Classroom*

Students highlighted the practical benefits of cultural understanding in social and professional interactions outside the classroom. For instance, when traveling to English-speaking countries, their cultural knowledge helped them navigate social situations and make connections more easily. This practical application of cultural knowledge beyond the classroom underscores its importance for real-world language use.

### 4.7. *Evaluation of Teaching Methods and Materials*

Participants praised teaching methods that actively integrated cultural content but suggested the need for more diverse and interactive materials. They appreciated their teachers' efforts to bring culture into lessons but expressed a desire for more interactive activities and real-life simulations. This feedback points to the effectiveness of current approaches while also highlighting areas for improvement.

### 4.8. *Future Perspectives on Cultural Understanding in Language Education*

Students expressed optimism about the long-term benefits of cultural understanding for their careers and personal growth. They recommended incorporating more immersive cultural experiences into the curriculum, such as cultural exchanges and opportunities to interact with native speakers. These suggestions aim to make the learning experience richer and more effective, ensuring that students are well-prepared for future challenges and opportunities in English-speaking environments.

These findings illustrate the multifaceted role of cultural understanding in language education, highlighting its importance for effective language acquisition and practical application in various contexts.

## V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of cultural understanding in enhancing language learning among fourth-year English majors. Exposure to different cultures through media, interactions with native speakers, and study materials emerged as a significant motivator and contextual enhancer for students. This aligns with previous research that emphasizes the importance of cultural immersion in language acquisition (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993). The positive influence of cultural exposure on language proficiency and confidence demonstrates that language learning is not merely a cognitive process but also a cultural one.

Participants' perceptions of cultural understanding highlight its essential role in mastering English. Understanding cultural practices and social norms enables students to use the language appropriately, reflecting the intricate relationship between language and culture posited by linguistic anthropologists (Agar, 1994). The integration of cultural topics into classroom lessons was particularly effective in engaging students and enhancing their grasp of language nuances. This suggests that curricula should be designed to incorporate cultural content actively, making learning more relevant and relatable to students.

Despite the clear benefits, students also faced challenges in understanding subtle cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions. These difficulties point to the complexity of cultural learning and the need for targeted support in this area. Educators might consider incorporating more focused activities and resources to help students navigate these challenges. The suggestion for more interactive and diverse materials reflects a need for dynamic and immersive learning experiences that can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

The practical benefits of cultural understanding were evident in students' real-world interactions. Their ability to navigate social situations and make connections in English-speaking environments highlights the value of cultural competence beyond the classroom. This practical application reinforces the idea that language education should prepare students not only for academic success but also for effective communication in global contexts.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the benefits of cultural understanding in language education, emphasizing its crucial role in enhancing language skills, engaging students, and preparing them for real-world interactions. The findings suggest that incorporating cultural content into language curricula can significantly improve students' learning experiences and outcomes. However, the challenges identified indicate a need for more targeted support and diverse materials to help students fully grasp cultural nuances.

## Language Learning Through a Cultural Lens: Assessing the Benefits of Cultural Understanding in Language Education

Future research could explore the long-term impacts of cultural understanding on language proficiency and career success. Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of specific teaching methods and materials in fostering cultural competence would provide further guidance for educators. Overall, this study highlights the multifaceted nature of language learning and the indispensable role of cultural understanding in achieving linguistic and communicative competence.

### REFERENCES

- 1) Baker, W. (2015). *Culture and identity through English as a lingua franca*. De Gruyter Mouton.
- 2) Bialystok, E. (2009). Bilingualism: The good, the bad, and the indifferent. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 12(1), 3-11.
- 3) Byram, M., & Feng, A. (2004). *Culture and language learning: Teaching, research and scholarship*. Language Teaching, 37(3), 149-168.
- 4) Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- 5) Byram, M. (2021). *Intercultural citizenship and language education*. The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication.
- 6) Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- 7) Crystal, D. (2012). *English as a global language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- 8) Deardorff, D. K. (2006). *The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization*. Journal of Studies in International Education, 10(3), 241-266.
- 9) Deardorff, D. K. (2020). *Manual for developing intercultural competencies: Story circles*. UNESCO Publishing.
- 10) Duff, P. A., & Anderson, T. (2015). *Academic language and literacy socialization for second language students*. In The Handbook of Classroom Discourse and Interaction (pp. 337-352). Wiley Blackwell.
- 11) Grin, F., Sfreddo, C., & Vaillancourt, F. (2010). *The economics of the multilingual workplace*. Routledge.
- 12) Hennebry, M., Lo, Y. Y., & Macaro, E. (2012). *Differential effects of cultural instruction on motivation and attainment: A study of year 8 French students*. Language Learning Journal, 40(1), 7-28.
- 13) Kinginger, C. (2009). *Language learning and study abroad: A critical reading of research*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- 14) Kramsch, C. (2013). *Theorizing translanguaging/transcultural competence*. In The Multilingual Turn in Languages Education: Opportunities and Challenges (pp. 15-31). Multilingual Matters.
- 15) Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews*. SAGE Publications.
- 16) Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford University Press.
- 17) Liu, J. (2014). *The effect of culture on learning motivation in Chinese students in a UK university*. Studies in Higher Education, 39(9), 1669-1686.
- 18) Matsuda, A. (2017). *Preparing teachers to teach English as an international language*. Multilingual Matters.
- 19) Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. SAGE Publications.
- 20) Peng, S. (2015). *The impact of intercultural competence training on language learning*. Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 44(4), 313-329.
- 21) Risager, K. (2018). *Representations of the world in language textbooks*. Multilingual Matters.
- 22) Schulz, R. A. (2007). *The challenge of assessing cultural understanding in the context of foreign language instruction*. Foreign Language Annals, 40(1), 9-26.
- 23) Sercu, L., et al. (2005). *Foreign language teachers and intercultural competence: An international investigation*. Multilingual Matters.
- 24) Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- 25) Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- 26) Wilkinson, S. (2002). *The omnipresent classroom during summer study abroad: American students in conversation with their French hosts*. The Modern Language Journal, 86(2), 157-173.



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.