

English-Mediated Cultural Learning through Local Storytelling in Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract: In the context of global education and intercultural communication, English language learning in Chinese higher education is increasingly expected to support not only linguistic development but also cultural understanding and self-expression. This paper explores how local storytelling serves as a medium for English-mediated cultural learning among Chinese university students. Drawing on classroom practices and thematic examples, the study describes common types of storytelling tasks—such as personal speeches, cultural essays, and multimedia projects—and identifies frequently chosen themes, including traditional festivals, food culture, and family customs. It also discusses the opportunities such tasks offer for enhancing language fluency, as well as the challenges related to linguistic limitations and cultural translation. Finally, the paper highlights pedagogical implications, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive instruction and supportive learning environments. The findings suggest that storytelling can play a meaningful role in bridging language learning with cultural identity formation and intercultural communication.

Keywords: English language education; cultural learning; storytelling

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1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, English language education in higher education has increasingly moved beyond grammar and vocabulary to embrace broader educational goals such as intercultural communication, global competence, and cultural understanding. As Chinese universities strive to internationalize their curricula and prepare students for cross-cultural engagement, there is a growing emphasis on the integration of local cultural content into English learning environments.

Local storytelling—defined here as the use of personal, regional, or traditional narratives—has emerged as a meaningful way to help students express their cultural identity in

English. These storytelling activities may take the form of classroom speeches, written essays, digital video projects, or group presentations. While seemingly simple, such practices have the potential to support students in developing both linguistic skills and cultural awareness. By encouraging learners to share aspects of their heritage, values, and experiences in English, educators provide students with opportunities to connect language learning with their own sense of place and identity^[1].

However, the effective implementation of cultural storytelling in English language classrooms still faces several challenges. Students may struggle with vocabulary and translation when expressing culturally specific

ideas. Teachers may lack adequate materials or strategies to guide students in narrating local content in globally comprehensible ways. Furthermore, many language programs remain exam-driven, leaving limited room for creative and culturally responsive learning tasks.

Despite these challenges, the inclusion of local storytelling in English learning holds promise for transforming how students engage with both language and culture. It shifts learners from passive recipients of foreign content to active narrators of their own lived experiences. In doing so, it contributes to the broader educational aim of cultivating intercultural competent individuals who can participate in meaningful global dialogue^[2].

This paper explores how English-mediated local storytelling functions as a form of cultural learning in the context of Chinese higher education. Drawing on relevant literature and illustrative classroom practices, it aims to describe the forms, functions, and educational value of this approach. Rather than adopting a quantitative or qualitative empirical method, the paper takes a descriptive and reflective stance, offering insights for educators and curriculum designers seeking to promote cultural expression through English education.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1 Cultural Learning in Language Education

Language education is no longer confined to linguistic accuracy alone; it now encompasses the development of cultural competence and global awareness. In this context, cultural learning refers to the process by which learners acquire knowledge, attitudes, and skills that enable them to understand and interact

effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. Within English language education, cultural learning is essential, as English often serves as a global medium of communication among diverse populations.

According to Byram (1997), intercultural communicative competence involves not only linguistic proficiency but also the ability to interpret and relate cultural meanings. Learners are expected to move between cultural perspectives and develop critical awareness of both their own and others' values and practices^[3]. In Chinese higher education, this implies that English instruction should not only equip students with communicative abilities but also foster an understanding of their own cultural heritage and its expression in international settings.

Culture, in this sense, is not a static set of facts to be memorized (e.g., festivals or food), but a lived and evolving system of meanings that individuals experience and perform. When students engage in cultural learning, especially through storytelling, they participate in a dialogic process of representing who they are and how they see the world—within and across cultures^[4].

2.2 English-Mediated Storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful educational strategy that integrates language use, personal reflection, and cultural transmission. In second language learning, it helps students structure ideas, practice vocabulary and grammar in context, and develop fluency through narrative logic. When used in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, storytelling becomes a space where learners can merge linguistic practice with cultural expression.

English-mediated storytelling refers to the use of English to narrate experiences, histories, or cultural traditions. It allows students to express local or national perspectives through a global language. This practice is particularly meaningful in multilingual, multicultural educational contexts where learners are both language students and cultural ambassadors^[5].

In Chinese university classrooms, storytelling assignments—such as introducing one’s hometown, narrating a family tradition, or explaining a local festival—are increasingly incorporated into English courses. These tasks help students develop narrative skills and foster a deeper connection between language learning and self-expression. More importantly, they promote a form of cultural literacy in which learners practice articulating culturally situated meanings in ways that are accessible to an international audience.

3. Local Storytelling Practices in Chinese Higher Education

As Chinese universities adapt to the demands of intercultural communication, many English language programs have begun to include storytelling tasks that encourage students to express cultural content. These tasks vary in format and complexity but share a common goal: to engage students in using English not just as a tool for communication, but as a means of cultural representation. Through storytelling, students gain opportunities to make personal and local experiences meaningful in a global context.

3.1 Types of Storytelling Tasks in the English Classroom

In the context of Chinese higher education, storytelling tasks are typically embedded in

English speaking, writing, or integrated skills courses. These tasks invite students to share aspects of their cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, or local knowledge with an imagined or real international audience. Below are some common types of storytelling tasks that are frequently used in university English classrooms:

3.1.1 Personal Narrative Speeches

Students are asked to deliver short speeches in English that recount meaningful personal or family experiences, often connected to their hometowns, traditions, or values. These speeches help students practice organizing ideas logically, using past tense verbs appropriately, and building confidence in public speaking. For example, a student might share the story of how their family celebrates the Lunar New Year, explaining both the traditions and the meanings behind them.

3.1.2 Cultural Introduction Essays

In writing-focused courses, students may be asked to write essays that introduce elements of their local culture to an international audience. Common topics include traditional festivals, local cuisines, historical landmarks, or customs. These assignments not only develop writing skills but also encourage students to reflect on how to present culturally specific concepts in an accessible and engaging way.

3.1.3 Multimedia Storytelling Projects

With the rise of digital media in education, some instructors incorporate video-based or audio-based storytelling projects. Students may be asked to create short videos introducing their hometown, narrating a local legend, or documenting a traditional craft. These projects integrate visual and spoken language skills and

appeal to students' creativity. In many cases, they are shared on classroom platforms or public channels, adding a real-world communication element.

3.2 Typical Local Cultural Themes

When engaging in English-mediated storytelling, Chinese university students often draw upon themes that are personally meaningful and culturally distinctive. These themes serve not only as content for language practice but also as vehicles for expressing identity, heritage, and values. While individual preferences vary, certain cultural topics appear frequently across storytelling tasks due to their relevance, familiarity, and symbolic significance. This section outlines some of the most common local cultural themes chosen by students in classroom storytelling assignments.

3.2.1 Traditional Festivals and Customs

Traditional Chinese festivals such as the Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, and Lantern Festival are among the most frequently chosen topics. Students often explain the origins, rituals, food, and symbolic meanings associated with these celebrations. For example, a student might describe the process of making dumplings during the Spring Festival, connecting the activity to ideas of family reunion and good fortune. These topics allow students to link personal memories with broader cultural narratives.

3.2.2 Regional Cuisine and Food Culture

Food is a popular and relatable theme that enables students to share details of their local lifestyle and regional identity. Students may introduce iconic dishes from their hometowns—such as Dalian seafood, Sichuan hot pot, or Xi'an hand-pulled noodles—and

explain their cultural significance, preparation methods, or social contexts. Storytelling through food often evokes strong emotional connections and provides opportunities to discuss deeper cultural values, such as hospitality, health, or community bonding.

3.3 Opportunities and Challenges in Cultural Expression

Engaging in English-mediated local storytelling offers valuable opportunities for Chinese university students to develop both linguistic skills and intercultural competence. By narrating local stories, students begin to see English not merely as a foreign language but as a meaningful tool for expressing personal identity and cultural heritage. At the same time, this process is not without its challenges. Students often encounter linguistic, conceptual, and contextual obstacles when trying to present culturally rich material in a second language. This section explores the key opportunities and challenges associated with cultural expression through English storytelling in higher education settings.

3.3.1 Opportunities

Storytelling encourages students to use English in a purposeful, emotionally resonant way. Unlike mechanical drills or textbook exercises, storytelling tasks require students to draw on a wide range of vocabulary, tenses, and discourse structures to communicate meaningful content. This enhances language fluency and helps learners internalize language patterns more naturally.

As students choose, structure, and share stories rooted in their own cultural backgrounds, they develop a deeper awareness of their traditions and values. The process of explaining

local customs or beliefs in English often prompts students to reflect on why these elements matter to them and how they differ from those in other cultures.

By adapting their stories for international audiences, students practice cultural translation—making implicit values explicit, defining culturally specific terms, and anticipating misunderstandings. These tasks cultivate key intercultural communication skills, such as audience awareness, empathy, and the ability to negotiate meaning across cultures.

3.3.2 Challenges

Many students find it difficult to describe abstract cultural ideas or specific local practices due to limited vocabulary or unfamiliarity with appropriate English expressions. For example, terms related to rituals, symbolism, or traditional beliefs may not have direct equivalents in English, requiring careful paraphrasing or simplification.

Some students may feel uncertain about their ability to communicate effectively in English, especially when dealing with complex cultural content. Additionally, not all students are experienced storytellers, which can affect their ability to structure narratives coherently or engage their audience. This is particularly evident in oral storytelling tasks where spontaneity and fluency are required.

4. Educational Value and Pedagogical Implications

Integrating local storytelling into English language education offers more than just a new classroom activity—it represents a pedagogical shift toward more culturally responsive, learner-centered, and globally relevant education. In the context of Chinese higher education, this

approach enables students to connect language learning with identity formation, intercultural competence, and communicative purpose. This section highlights the key educational benefits of English-mediated storytelling and outlines pedagogical strategies that can help maximize its value in classroom practice.

4.1 Educational Value

By introducing local storytelling, students are empowered to bring their own cultural perspectives into the learning process. This enhances cultural ownership and allows learners to see themselves not only as recipients of global knowledge but also as contributors to intercultural dialogue.

Storytelling tasks motivate students to use English for real-world, emotionally engaging purposes. Instead of memorizing set phrases or composing generic essays, learners engage in authentic communication by describing personal experiences, traditions, and values. This makes the learning process more meaningful and improves retention of language structures and vocabulary.

For many students, the opportunity to narrate stories related to their hometown, family, or cultural practices becomes a form of self-expression. These activities encourage personal reflection and help students explore who they are in relation to their community and the world. As students share their stories in English, they begin to develop a bilingual identity that blends local and global perspectives.

4.2 Pedagogical Implications

To fully realize the potential of storytelling as a tool for cultural learning, instructors should

adopt specific strategies that support student success:

Teachers can create assignments that guide students to explore specific cultural elements (e.g., customs, values, artifacts) and reflect on their meanings. Providing models and prompts helps students structure their narratives and stay focused on cultural learning goals.

Instructors should offer targeted vocabulary, useful sentence patterns, and culturally adaptive expressions to help students convey complex ideas in English. Supplementary resources, such as bilingual glossaries or sample scripts, can assist in bridging language gaps.

Incorporating digital tools (e.g., video recording, photo essays, voiceovers) can make storytelling more engaging and accessible, especially for students with different strengths. These formats also reflect real-world communication practices in global contexts.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the practice of English-mediated cultural learning through local storytelling in the context of Chinese higher education. In response to the growing need for intercultural competence and meaningful language education, storytelling has emerged as a valuable pedagogical tool that bridges language learning with cultural identity, personal reflection, and global communication.

Through classroom tasks such as personal narrative speeches, cultural essays, multimedia projects, and group presentations, students are encouraged to draw upon their lived experiences and local heritage. Common storytelling themes—ranging from traditional festivals and food to family customs and regional legends—provide a rich foundation for expressing culture in English. These activities not only improve linguistic fluency but also promote cultural awareness, self-confidence, and communicative adaptability.

However, the process is not without challenges. Students may encounter difficulties with vocabulary, translation, and audience adaptation, while instructors may lack resources or frameworks to guide storytelling effectively. Addressing these challenges requires intentional instructional design, cultural scaffolding, and supportive classroom environments.

Despite these limitations, the integration of storytelling into English language education holds significant promise. It encourages students to become active cultural participants rather than passive language learners. It nurtures empathy and global understanding by enabling students to see both their own and others' cultures from multiple perspectives. Most importantly, it reinforces the idea that language learning is not merely about acquiring skills but also about building meaningful connections across cultures.

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