

IJACT 24-9-12

A Study on Cultural Learning Through Cultural Comparison Activities: Focusing on Learner Perception

HyeJeong Kim

Prof., College of General Education, Kookmin Univ., Korea
Email: naa4907@kookmin.ac.kr

Abstract

The aims of this study were to introduce cultural teaching procedures and propose cultural comparison activities as a practical method of cultural learning. It also analyzed learners' attitudes toward cultural learning through the aforementioned activities and examined considerations for holding cultural classes in the future. The research involved conducting a class underlain by four stages: warm-up, a cultural item comparison activity, wrap-up, and opinion submission. Data were collected through self-opinion journals and open-ended questionnaires, after which they were qualitatively analyzed. The results showed that the learners were highly satisfied with cultural learning through cultural comparison activities (73.7%) because of the efficiency of such a learning method, opportunities for proactive learning through interaction, increased interest and motivation, and the fact that it helps them understand their own cultures. We need to develop activities that enable learners to participate in a variety of ways through the mutual exchange of opinions when planning cultural classes. Pedagogical implications for integrated language and cultural classes are provided.

Keywords: *Cultural learning, Cultural comparison activities, Learner perception, Cultural classes*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the advent of globalization and the development of cutting-edge technology in recent years, the entire world has become connected, and opportunities to go beyond the boundaries of one's country and encounter other cultures have become endless. Intercultural interactions occur every day, and seeing international students in various educational settings is no longer unusual. This phenomenon has further accelerated with the development of global websites, such as Google, and various online media platforms, such as YouTube and Twitter. Therefore, acquiring a second language and developing extensive knowledge and understanding of other cultures have become necessary. Cultural learning is now critical to smooth and successful communication with people from all over the world.

The global era requires molding international human resources with integrated language skills and cultural knowledge. To achieve this, cultural programs that involve cross-cultural comparison are actively implemented. For example, according to the Korean Culture Promotion Service, the Korean Cultural Center in Vietnam

Manuscript received: June 20, 2024 / revised: July 15, 2024 / accepted: September 5, 2024
Corresponding Author: naa4907@kookmin.ac.kr
Tel: +82-2-910-5947
Associate Professor, College of General Education, Kookmin Univ., Korea

conducted a Korean and Vietnamese Lunar New Year cultural experience program in January 2024 with a theme focusing on the lunar new year, a cultural aspect common to Korea and Vietnam. A special lecture was delivered to explain the similarities and differences in lunar new year cultures between the two countries, and activities such as making money envelopes and rice cake soup tasting were held. In line with these initiatives, recent foreign language education has focused not only on the development of learners' communicative competence but also on the promotion of intercultural competence [1] [2].

English learners must be able to master English as a lingua franca and interact smoothly with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Despite the demands of the times, however, there is a significant lack of research on effective practical teaching methods or practical learning methods related to intercultural competence in English education fields in Korean universities [3]. According to the 2022 revised curriculum, English education requires training communicatively competent students in interacting with people around the globe, being familiar with their cultures, and spreading their culture to the world [4]. As a case study on cultural learning, the current research identified teaching procedures for cultural learning and formulated cultural comparison activities based on a movie. It also analyzed learners' perceptions and attitudes toward cultural learning through the aforementioned activities to determine factors for consideration in holding cultural classes in the future.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research has been actively directed toward comparing and analyzing various cultures, and the comparative cultural aspects explored are very diverse. Topics of cultural comparison are equally distinct, ranging from neighborhood playground cultures in Korea and Australia [5] to differences in negotiation communication between Korea, China, and Japan [6]. A book comparing world cultures revealed that people eat, play, and work in the same way but that these aspects differ depending on culture [7]. This book emphasizes that in order for people of different cultures to communicate and understand each other, a necessary objective is to comprehend not only the languages that they speak but also their cultural sensitivities.

In a study of differences between cultures [8], nine high school English textbooks from Japan, Korea, and Vietnam were analyzed based on cultural classification theory [9]. The researchers classified these differences into four types: inner circle, outer circle, expanding circle, and non-included differences. The results showed that most of the textbooks accommodate various cultures but are highly biased toward American culture.

In research that emphasized the use of cultural comparison materials as a way to integrate language and cultural learning, the authors investigated the impact of game activities based on cultural content on learners' intercultural competence [10]. Two types of game activities were conducted for 16 weeks, and in-depth interviews and teacher observations were carried out to determine the effect of game activities combined with culture on learners' cultural knowledge. The researchers reported that learners show balanced attitudes toward their own cultures and the target culture and that classes grounded in games stimulate greater interest in cultural and English language learning.

Finally, a comparison of two university English classrooms in the United States and Korea involved participant observations and qualitative interviews. The study showed that while American ESL classes provide continuous exposure to and engagement with intercultural topics through discussions, debates and critical writing assignments, Korean EFL classrooms do not appear to include intercultural topics [1].

One cultural study [11] proposed role-playing as a way to change multicultural awareness among students participating in liberal arts classes. This study reports that students were able to develop an attitude of understanding and respect for other cultures in the process of preparing and implementing role-plays related to multiculturalism. A study on cultural learning using movies [12] emphasized the use of various movies for multicultural learning and argued that task-oriented participation activities that allow learners to participate directly and become aware of cultural differences should be actively used.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Period, Subject, and Textbook

This study was conducted for 15 weeks from early March to early June 2024, and it involved 39 college students taking general English classes at OO University in Seoul. A 75-minute liberal arts class was held once a week, with the enrolled students being of diverse year levels and majors. Class composition was as follows: Among the students, 12 (20.3%), 23 (39%), 16 (27.1%), and 8 (13.6%) were in their first, second, third, and fourth years, respectively. In terms of major, 13 students (22%) belonged to the College of Creative Engineering, 10 (16.8%) to the College of Science and Technology, 9 (15.3%) to the College of Law, 8 (13.6%) to the College of Business Administration, and 5 (8.5%) to the College of Economics and Business Administration. Additionally, 6 (10.2%) students were enrolled in the Software Convergence College and the College of Physical Education (3 students each); 6 (10.2%) in the College of Architecture, the Global Humanities and Regional College, and the College of Arts (2 students each); and 2 (3.4%) in the College of Social Sciences and the College of Art and Design (1 student each). Among the 39 students, one was Vietnamese.

The research textbook used in the class was *New York Always in Love* [13] and the movie on which the textbook is based, *The Accidental Husband*, was also used. The movie is set in New York, which symbolizes American culture, and prominently showcases Indian culture through an Indian family living in the city. The textbook was therefore considered an appropriate material for the comparative analysis of the cultures of each country.

3.2 Procedure

The class consisted of four stages: warm-up, cultural item comparison activity, wrap-up, and opinion submission. In the warm-up stage, the learners watched a movie clip and tried to explore cultural items that reflected cultural styles in the scenes that they viewed. They endeavored to determine in what conversation or situation a given cultural item arose. The comparison of cultural items involved (1) the selection and exploration of the cultural items shown in the clip, (2) the recognition of other cultures and the comparison of the cultural items, (3) follow-up activities, and (4) learning activities for English expressions representing other cultures. For example, in the movie, the female protagonist, Emma, attends the *upanayana* ceremony, also known as the Indian initiation or coming-of-age ceremony, at the invitation of Patrick, who is recorded as married on paper. When explaining this to her fiancé, Richard, Emma said, “He had them at the book signing. Between the dinner and the *upanayana*, Indian bar mitzvah, don’t ask, I misplaced them.” The learners selected *upanayana* and bar mitzvah, the Jewish coming-of-age ceremony, as cultural items for exploration, and they searched for related information. Group activities for comparing and analyzing Hinduism’s *upanayana*, Judaism’s bar mitzvah, and Korea’s coming-of-age ceremony were carried out. The teacher asked the learners to conduct research on details regarding the events and create an activity sheet that compares and contrasts dates, event procedures, event meanings, and event content. After completing their activity sheets, the students presented their outputs in groups or uploaded them to Padlet (padlet.com) for sharing with the rest of the class. As a follow-up activity, the learners were required to compare representative holidays or family events in the United States, India, and Korea. They recorded relevant information in groups and uploaded it to Padlet or e-Campus (the virtual university platform). Finally, they analyzed the contexts in which cultural items appeared and learned the English vocabulary or expressions related to them. Figure 1 shows the results of a speech recording activity, during which the learners compared the holidays in each country. Figure 1 shows in detail the activities of Group 1 comparing Lunar New Year and Christmas, Group 2 comparing Chuseok and Halloween, and Group 3 comparing Jeongwol Daeboreum (the first full moon of the lunar new year) and ancestral rites.

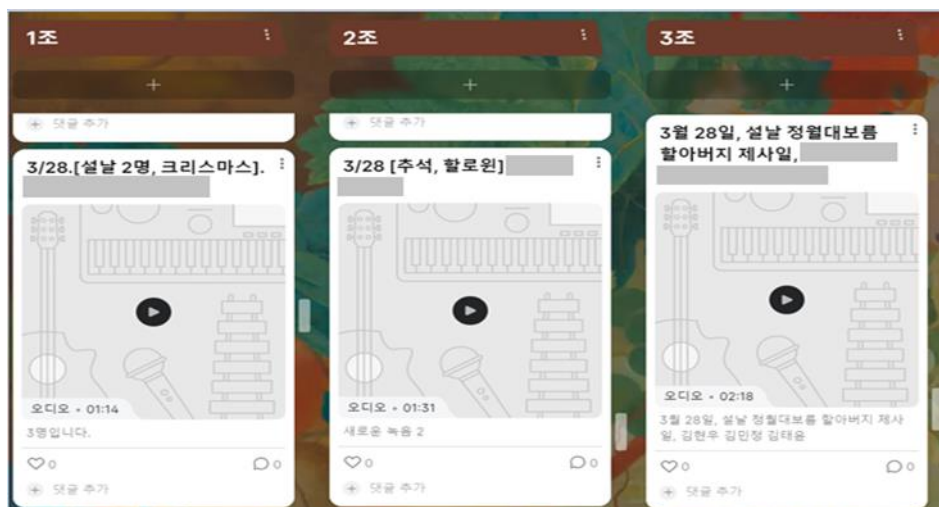


Figure 1. Cultural comparison activity: Comparison of holidays by country

In the wrap-up stage, the cultural items and related language expressions learned were organized through Kahoot activities. In the opinion submission stage, the students were encouraged to freely write about their thoughts, personal opinions, and class improvements regarding the class content or cultural items learned for submission through e-Campus. The answers submitted by the learners constituted their self-opinion journals.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

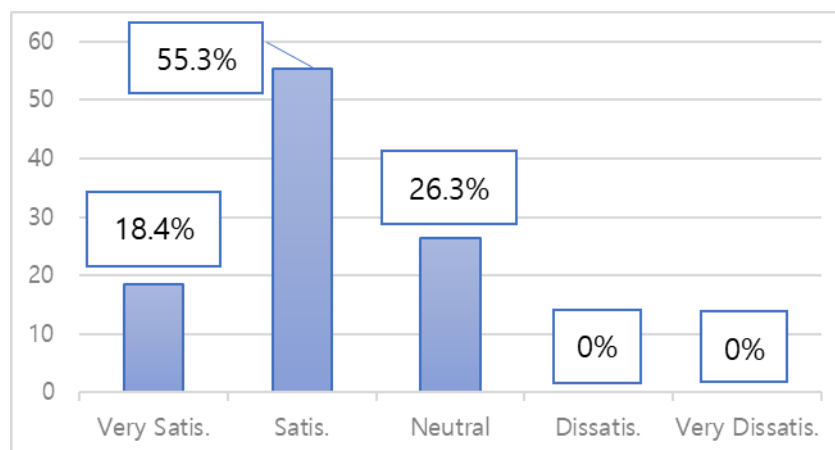
This study presented teaching procedures for cultural comparison activities and examined the learners' perceptions and attitudes toward them. For these purposes, an open-ended questionnaire was administered. The students were asked about their satisfaction with cultural learning through the cultural comparison activities and the reasons for their evaluations. The questions are as follows:

1. How satisfied are you with the cultural class featuring cultural comparison activities?
 ① Very satisfied ② Satisfied ③ Neutral ④ Dissatisfied ⑤ Very dissatisfied
2. Please explain your answer to question 1.

The responses were organized in an Excel file, and similar answers were categorized into meaningful words. The data from both the questionnaires and self-opinion journals were qualitatively analyzed.

4. Results and Discussion

The learners' answers to question 1 are shown in Figure 2. As shown in Figure 2, among the students, 18.4% ($n = 7$) were very satisfied with the cultural learning that they experienced through the cultural comparison activities, 55.3% ($n = 21$) were satisfied, and 26.3% ($n = 10$) opted for the "neutral" option. The learners were generally satisfied with such learning (73.7%).



Note. Satis. = satisfied; Dissatis. = dissatisfied.

Figure 2. Learner satisfaction with the cultural class

Because question 2 was open-ended, the learners provided various responses. By categorizing various opinions into meaning units, the reasons that the learners provided were the effectiveness of cultural learning, opportunities for proactive learning through interaction, increased interest and motivation, assistance in understanding their own cultures, and other reasons. Table 1 shows the specific opinions of learners.

Table 1. Reasons for satisfaction with the cultural class

Category	Learner's Opinions
Effectiveness of cultural learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am satisfied because it helped me study various cultures. - It was a class that was very consistent with the goals of the course. I think I definitely learned about Indian culture in this class. - It was useful to learn about American and Indian cultures, which I didn't know much about.
Proactive learning through interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I liked it because it wasn't a one-sided lecture class from a professor. - The best point is to explore culture while exchanging opinions with group members! - It was nice to be able to study proactively by searching for information, exchanging opinions, and making presentations to solve tasks with group members.
Increased interest and motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The class was really fun because we watched movies and had a lot of discussions. - Introducing Korean culture to foreign friends was the most fun, and I want to do it again. - I want to learn more about cultures other than Indian culture.
Help in understanding their own cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - During the comparison activity, it was useful to learn about things I didn't know about even though it was part of our country's culture. - It was an opportunity to learn more about our country's culture as well as other countries' cultures. - It was a very useful class, as I learned why such culture arose and how it developed, something that was only recognized as a cultural phenomenon unique to our country. - It was nice to be able to specifically analyze things that were only recognized as cultural phenomena unique to our country. It was a very useful class, as I learned why such a culture arose and how it developed.
Other opinions or suggestions for improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Next time, I think it would be fun to explore Central and South American cultures through Disney works like <i>Coco</i>. - Please recommend some British cultural movies for me to study during summer vacation. - Group activities are fun, but sometimes it is difficult to do them every class time. - Please give us more time when doing comparison activities.

The first reason why the learners were satisfied with the cultural class was that it was helpful for cultural learning. They deemed the class advantageous in learning about various cultural items and were satisfied with their learning of American and Indian cultures, with which they were unfamiliar. These opinions are mostly consistent with the purposes of this study and indicate the need for cultural comparison activities in classes. Views related to this issue also appeared frequently in the self-opinion journals:

I was only vaguely familiar with the caste system in India, but I was surprised to learn that it had a detailed impact on all aspects of Indian life. (Week 6, P.H.J.)

The activity of comparing Korean dumplings with *boova schenkel* in the United States and samosa in India was very beneficial. It is great to learn about each country's culture through its food. (Week 3. S.G.H.)

The second reason why the learners were satisfied with the class was that it advanced proactive learning through interaction. The learners were satisfied with the processes of exploring and exchanging opinions to understand the cultural differences between the countries. They also experienced autonomy because the cultural comparison activity was not carried out through the instructor's explanation, but through collaboration among the students in exchanging their perspectives and expanding their cultural knowledge. Cultural comparison and exploration activities are necessary for proactive learning in cultural classes. Corresponding journal entries are as follows:

When I searched for information, talked with group members, selected useful things, and filled out the cultural comparison sheet, I was very proud that I was doing it on my own, rather than at the professor's request. (Week 4. G.J.K.)

I felt that the class activities were very much like college-level study, wherein instead of the professor's boring explanations, we searched for information, compared it, presented it, and shared our opinions. (Week 8. H.S.J.)

The students were satisfied with the class also because it stimulated interest in and motivation for cultural learning. They found watching the movie as well as discussing and exploring related cultural items enjoyable. The learners were motivated to learn about culture, as indicated in their desire to do another activity that introduces their countries' cultures to their foreign friends and learn more about other nations' cultures. These behaviors indicated that cultural comparison activities are beneficial in terms of driving interest in and motivation for cultural learning. The perspectives related to this matter were frequently mentioned in the self-opinion journals.

The Accidental Husband - I thought of this movie as simply a romantic love story, but I didn't realize there was so much culture involved. It's so interesting to watch the movie from a cultural perspective. (Week 5. L.Y.C.)

I am personally very interested in Northern Europe. If I get the chance, I want to learn about Northern European culture as well. (Week 9. P.S.Y.)

Finally, the learners were satisfied with the class because it allowed them to better know and understand their own cultures as well as those of other countries. As they learned about American and Indian cultures, the students also developed their knowledge of corresponding Korean cultural aspects through the comparative activities. The students compared cultural aspects, such as religion, holidays, food, breakfast scenes, family types, social awareness of occupations (e.g., firefighters), coming-of-age ceremonies, and shopping malls. They stated that they gained a better understanding of their country's culture or learned about things that they

did not know. Opinions related to this issue were discussed in the self-opinion journals as follows:

My family has always held ancestral rites, so I thought of them as just a family event. It was useful to learn about the origin and meaning of our country's ancestral rites while introducing each country's holidays. (Week 10. S.K.B.)

It was fun to learn about popular occupations in Korea. I compared occupational groups by country, and I hope that the social recognition and compensation of firefighters in our country will increase. (Week 13. C.Y.J.)

Other opinions and suggestions for improvement included the need to learn about Latin American culture, recommendations on British cultural films, the adjustment of the frequency of activities, and the adjustment of class activity times. This class focused on American and Indian cultures, but it seemed necessary to expand the comparative activities to other cultures. Cultural comparison activities were conducted in every class, but some students found this somewhat difficult. Addressing this issue may require adjusting the frequency of class activities or the magnitude of cultural comparison activities.

5. CONCLUSION

This study presented cultural comparison activities as a method of cultural learning and analyzed learners' perceptions and attitudes toward it. It also investigated matters to be considered when planning cultural classes. To these ends, a class involving warm-up, a cultural comparison activity, wrap-up, and opinion submission was conducted. The cultural comparison activity entailed selecting and exploring cultural items, recognizing other cultures and comparing cultural items, follow-up activities, and learning activities for English expressions that represent other cultures. To understand the learners' perceptions of the class and activities, they were asked to complete open-ended questionnaires and self-opinion journals during each class. The data from these were qualitatively analyzed. The findings indicate that the students were highly satisfied overall with the cultural learning that they experienced (73.7%). This satisfaction stemmed from the efficiency of cultural learning, the proactive learning through interaction that it enables, increased interest and motivation, and the fact that it helps understand one's own culture.

This study has limitations in that it covered the cultures of a few countries and involved a small sample. Nevertheless, we presented teaching procedures and activities as well as analyzed the learners' opinions on cross-cultural learning methods, thus contributing to the establishment of cultural classes in a multifaceted manner. On the basis of the research results, pedagogical suggestions for cultural classes were formulated.

First, the students expressed satisfaction with the smooth interaction between them and the autonomy that the cultural comparison activities afforded them. Therefore, when planning cultural classes, a necessary task is to develop activities that enable learners to participate in a variety of ways through the mutual exchange of opinions. To select cultural topics that can induce proactive learning through interaction and develop systematic class activities, we need to share information among instructors through online communities.

Second, the learners were interested in cultural learning and were motivated to learn about different cultures through the cultural comparison activities. At the beginning of a class, instructors should conduct a simple survey to determine the world cultures or cultural items that each learner is interested in. The improvement of learners' interest and motivation can be further accelerated if instructors address the cultural items identified by learners along with the cultures presented in, for example, films.

Third, the students were assigned a cultural comparison task every class period to determine the usefulness of cultural comparison activities, but some of them found this burdensome. To resolve this problem, we, as instructors, should adjust the frequency of cultural comparison activities through learner surveys and change the magnitudes of tasks systematically during each class. This study focused on the American and Indian cultures shown in the selected movie, but subsequent research should emphasize multicultural diversity and suggest systematic classroom activities that enable more expanded cultural learning.

REFERENCE

- [1] M. Byram, A. Nichols, and D. Stevens, *Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice*, Multilingual Matter, 2001.
- [2] M. Pegrum, "Film, Culture and Identity: Critical Intercultural Literacies for the Language Classroom," *Language and Intercultural Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 136-154, December 2008.
- [3] S. H. Jin, "A Comparative Study of Two University English Language Classrooms, an ESL Classroom in the U.S. vs. an EFL Classroom in Korea: A Focus on the Development of Intercultural Communicative Competence," *English Language and Literature Teaching*, Vol. 24, No. 4, pp. 195-220, December 2018.
- [4] Ministry of Education, *English Department Curriculum*, Ministry of Education Notice No. 2022-33, 2022.
- [5] G. I. Jeon, "Comparative Cultural Case Studies on Neighborhood Playgrounds of Korea and Australia," *Early Childhood Education*, Vol. 36, No. 3, pp. 591-617, January 2016. DOI: 10.18023/kjece.2016.36.3.025
- [6] M. Y. Ahn, "A Comparative Study on Cross-Cultural Communication for Negotiation in Korea, China and Japan," *Korean Journal of Communication Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 31-56, August 2018.
- [7] S. W. Kim, *The Earth through Cultural Code*, Characters and Ideas, 2019.
- [8] J. H. Shim, "A Study of Cultural Aspects in Asian EFL English Teaching Materials," *The Journal of Foreign Studies*, Vol. 55, pp. 59-82, March 2021.
- [9] B. B. Kachru, *Asian Englishes: Beyond the Canon*, Hong Kong University Press, 1992.
- [10] J. H. Lee and H. J. Ihm, "The Effect of Cultural Comparison Material Assisted Game Activities on the Intercultural Competence of Elementary School Students," *The Jungang Journal of English Language and Literature*, Vol. 56, No. 2, pp. 259-281, June 2014. DOI: 10.18853/jjell.2014.56.2.012
- [11] H. J. Mun, Y. S. Kim and X. H. Sun, "A Qualitative Study on the Process of Changing Multicultural Perceptions of College Students Participating in Role-playing Oriented Liberal Arts Classes," *Korean Journal of General Education*, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 173-192, August 2023.
- [12] H. J. Kim, "A Study on Multicultural Learning Using Movies for College Students," *The Journal of Learner-Centered Curriculum and Instruction*, Vol. 24, No. 9, pp. 233-243, May 2024.
- [13] W. K. Choi and A. Schenck, *The Accidental Husband*, Screen Film Company, 2009.