



Integrating Ethnic Narratives into EFL Teaching: A Reflective Case Study in a Chinese University Setting

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Abstract: In the continually developing field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, integrating ethnic narratives has become increasingly important to enhance learning outcomes and foster intercultural competence. This reflective case study explores the effectiveness of incorporating ethnic narratives into EFL teaching within a Chinese university setting. Through the self-observation and reflection of a six-class-hour unit on China's metro development, I analyze my own bilingual teaching approach, using both English and Chinese to clarify concepts, and employing various strategies such as multimedia resources to ensure comprehension and engagement. The study finds that integrating ethnic narratives through culturally relevant content and bilingual instruction effectively promotes student engagement and critical thinking.

Keywords: Ethnic narratives, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), effective strategies

Introduction

In the evolving landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, there is an increasing emphasis on the integration of culturally relevant content to enhance learning outcomes and foster intercultural competence. Ethnic narratives, which encapsulate the rich cultural identities and experiences of diverse student populations, have emerged as a powerful tool in this regard. These narratives not only reflect the students' backgrounds but also enrich the learning environment by promoting engagement and deeper understanding of the material.

Despite the recognized benefits, the integration of ethnic narratives into EFL teaching remains underexplored, particularly in the context of Chinese universities. This gap highlights a critical need for research that examines how such narratives can be effectively incorporated into EFL curricula to improve both language proficiency and cultural awareness. Addressing this gap, the current study seeks to explore the practical implementation of ethnic narratives in EFL teaching and their impact on lesson plan design and delivery. By identifying specific strategies and assessing their effectiveness, this research aims to provide insights into the benefits and challenges of using ethnic narratives in EFL education.

Literature Review

Definition of ethnic narratives

Ethic/national narratives refer to the transmission of cultural memory and the shaping of cultural identity through the telling of a nation's history, culture, and values. In the field of language education, the role of narratives, particularly ethnic/national narratives, has been increasingly recognized as pivotal in shaping the educational experiences and identity perceptions of students. Meadows extends this discussion by introducing the concept of "national narratives" within language classrooms. He defines these narratives as ideological affordances that operate at a mezzo-level, mediating between the macro structures of national ideologies and the micro enactments of national identity within the classroom^[1]. This perspective is crucial as it highlights how language educators are not just passive transmitters of language but active participants in the reproduction or transformation of nationalism through their curricular and pedagogical choices. Hence, this definition is adopted for this research.

Theoretical foundations of integrating ethnic narratives

The integration of ethnic narratives in EFL teaching is grounded in several theoretical frameworks. Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" (1983) provides a foundational theory for understanding the construction of national identities^[2].

Anderson argues that nations are socially constructed entities, imagined by individuals who perceive themselves as part of a larger collective. The dissemination of print media in vernacular languages played a crucial role in creating a shared sense of community and identity among people who would never meet. In the context of EFL teaching, Anderson's theory suggests that incorporating ethnic narratives into the curriculum can help students form a more profound connection to the language by relating it to their sense of national identity and community. By understanding how these communities are imagined, educators can better design content that resonates with students' cultural backgrounds and national experiences.

Homi K. Bhabha's work on "Narrative and Nation" (1990) further explores the role of narrative in shaping national identities, particularly emphasizing the fluid and hybrid nature of these identities. Bhabha argues that national identities



are not static but are continuously redefined through narratives that reflect complex histories and cultural interactions^[3]. This perspective is particularly relevant for EFL teaching as it encourages the inclusion of diverse and hybrid ethnic narratives in the curriculum. By doing so, educators can help students appreciate the multiplicity of cultural identities and foster a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of national identity. Bhabha's insights into the negotiation of cultural identities can inform teaching strategies that embrace and celebrate cultural diversity within the classroom. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory also supports the integration of ethnic narratives by emphasizing the role of social interaction in the development of cognition. Vygotsky suggests that learning occurs through the mediation of language and cultural artifacts, and therefore, the use of ethnic narratives can facilitate the acquisition of language through more meaningful and culturally enriched contexts^[4]. This approach aligns language learning with students' cultural identities, enhancing engagement and motivation. Geneva Gay's "Culturally Responsive Teaching" offers practical strategies for implementing the principles of CRE in the classroom. CRT involves using students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles to make learning more appropriate and effective^[5]. In EFL teaching, this approach translates to the incorporation of ethnic narratives that reflect students' cultural backgrounds. Gay's work underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing students' cultural identities in the educational process. By doing so, educators can create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment. CRT resonates with Anderson's and Bhabha's theories by emphasizing the significance of cultural narratives in shaping educational experiences and outcomes.

The integration of Imagined Communities, Narrative and Nation, Sociocultural Theory Culturally Relevant Education, and Culturally Responsive Teaching provides a robust theoretical foundation for informing ethnic narratives in EFL teaching. Anderson and Bhabha offer insights into the construction and fluidity of national identities, while SCT, CRE and CRT provide practical strategies for incorporating these insights into the curriculum. Together, these theories highlight the importance of cultural relevance and responsiveness in education, encouraging EFL teachers to create lessons that resonate with students' national and cultural identities.

Previous empirical research related to ethnic narrative integration in classrooms

The study by Uzum et al. provides a critical examination of cultural representations in collegiate world language textbooks for Arabic, French, and German. Utilizing the concepts of imagined communities and a multimodal critical discourse analysis, the study reveals that these textbooks often perpetuate nation-state ideologies and tourism discourses, presenting an oversimplified and essentialized view of cultural identities^[6]. The textbooks tend to depict language communities as homogeneous and fail to address the complex, fluid, and diverse identities of these communities. Such representations can mislead learners about the real cultural dynamics and encourage a superficial understanding of the languages studied.

Building on the insights into educational materials, studies on classroom integration of ethnic narratives show significant benefits. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou emphasize that ethnic narratives enhance students' understanding of complex cultural histories, fostering critical thinking and boosting confidence in intercultural communication^[7]. Rachel Paterson demonstrates how a culturally responsive curriculum designed for Latino adolescents can combat disempowering educational practices and promote ethnic identity affirmation, which positively impacts academic motivation and achievement^[8]. Similarly, Coryell, Clark, and Pomerantz and Kang highlight how heritage learners and Korean EFL learners utilize ethnic narratives to construct multilingual and cultural identities^{[9][10]}. Eliyahu-Levi extends the discussion by examining how international collaborative learning experiences can foster intercultural competence. Her study, involving participants from Israel and the United States, shows that ethnically colored dialogues allow students to explore and appreciate diverse cultural, religious, and ideological characteristics^[11]. The outcomes indicate significant improvements in social skills and emotional attitudes toward diverse groups, suggesting that direct peer dialogues enrich students' socio-cultural perspectives and encourage a more inclusive worldview.

In summary, the body of research highlights that national and cultural narratives play a crucial role in language education. These narratives not only facilitate language learning but also help in fostering a deeper understanding of cultural identities, critical thinking, and confidence in intercultural communication. However, there is limited research specifically examining how these principles apply within the unique sociocultural and educational frameworks of East Asian countries, especially China. Furthermore, these studies often explore broad educational settings or focus on specific minority groups in Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how ethnic narratives can be effectively integrated into EFL curricula in universities where the predominant culture is significantly different from those typically studied. Additionally, while the positive effects of ethnic narratives on fostering intercultural competence and enhancing language acquisition are well-documented, there is a need to explore specific pedagogical strategies that can be utilized effectively in Chinese educational institutions.

Methodology

This study aims to explore and develop effective strategies for incorporating ethnic narratives into the EFL curriculum in China via reflecting my own journey of developing and delivering a teaching unit.

Research design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the integration of ethnic narratives in English teaching. The focus is on observing and reflecting the design and delivery of a specific teaching unit within the English for Critical Thinking course, a provincial-level high quality course. Through self-observation and reflection on my own teaching practices, the research aims to understand how ethnic narratives are integrated and the strategies employed, particularly focusing on:

- Examining how ethnic narratives can be adapted and integrated into EFL teaching to reflect and respect the cultural identities and experiences of Chinese university students.
- Identifying specific pedagogical approaches and materials that can be used to enhance students' engagement with and understanding of these narratives, thereby improving their language skills and intercultural competence.

Therefore, the following questions are to be addressed in this study.

- 1) How does the integration of ethnic narratives in English teaching influence the design and delivery of lesson plans?
- 2) What specific strategies are used to incorporate ethnic narratives into English teaching, and how effective are they?.

Participants

The participant for this study is myself, a female teacher with a diverse educational background, including domestic and international experiences. I am one of seven teachers in the English for Critical Thinking course team. I was selected for observation because I have been influenced by integrating critical thinking into my teaching. My unit addresses balanced arguments using Chinese metro expansion and development as a case study. This particular unit, comprising six class hours, will be the focus of observation and reflection. The unit focuses on the critical analysis of balanced arguments within the context of Chinese metro development.

Regarding my positionality, I acknowledge that my dual role as both the researcher and the subject of this study may influence the research process in various ways. My position as a teacher and researcher allows me to have a deep, personal insight into the classroom dynamics and teaching strategies employed. However, this also means that my reflections and observations are inherently subjective and shaped by my own experiences and biases. My background as a bilingual educator with extensive experience in both domestic and international contexts informs my understanding of integrating ethnic narratives and critical thinking in EFL teaching. My perspectives, teaching experiences, and knowledge significantly shape my approach to examining the effectiveness of these pedagogical strategies. Being part of the course team and having a vested interest in the success of the English for Critical Thinking course may also impact how I design, deliver, and reflect upon my teaching practices. By acknowledging these potential biases, I aim to provide a transparent account of my research process, striving for reflexivity and critical self-awareness throughout the study.

Data Collection:

The primary data collection method involved naturalistic classroom observations and video recordings. I observed and recorded six class hours of my own teaching to capture the authentic teaching and learning environment. This method allows for a detailed analysis of my instructional strategies, student interactions, and the overall classroom dynamics through multiple rounds of observation.

During the observations, detailed field notes were taken to document:

- My methods of integrating ethnic narratives.
- Classroom activities and student responses.
- Any notable interactions and engagement patterns.

Additional data were collected from my lesson plans and reflective teaching notes to gain insights into instructional design and pedagogical adjustments. As part of my reflective practice, I also reviewed video recordings of my teaching to evaluate the implementation of ethnic narratives and assess their impact on student engagement and critical thinking.

The analysis involved thematic analysis of the observation field notes and video recordings. This approach helped identify patterns and themes related to the integration of ethnic narratives, the effectiveness of teaching strategies, and student engagement. By analyzing these data, I aimed to understand the impact of my teaching practices on student learning and engagement.

Results

The following findings are based on detailed field notes from observing the six class hours of the teaching unit on Chinese metro development.

Ethic narratives integrated into the Lesson Plans

Ethic narratives integrated into the lesson plans is evidenced by using China's metro development as a central theme. As illustrated in Figure 1 and Table 1, the complete unit considered viewing/listening (a video), reading (an international blog) and writing (group work) within the context of considering, and creating, a balanced argument. Within the **Viewing and Thinking** component, students were presented with a presentation about China's Metros. The discourse focused on the history and development of China's metros in a global context and students were expected to consider how the

presentation provides balanced arguments. They were also expected to understand certain vocabulary in terms of their literal and contextual meaning etc. The **Reading and Thinking** component provided students with a blog review of the Nanning Metro, offering them an opportunity to understand, explore and evaluate the text, based on a set of provided questions. The questions primarily focused on features, comments, opinions and assessment of the Nanning Metro. Students were then expected to consider if the blog review postulates balanced or bias views. In addition, particular words and expressions were discussed. The final component of **Writing and Thinking** focused on the balanced argument approach where learning encompasses two aspects. Firstly, a lecture/presentation was delivered to illustrate and impart the skills of writing balanced arguments. Secondly, students were expected to refer to the blog review as well as the provided questions and then considered how to apply a balanced argument. Finally, a follow-up project was introduced, in which students performed a group exercise in critical thinking, critical writing and a balanced argument, through which a statement about the impact of metro's cities was written.

Fig 1. Theme-based learning components



Lead-in	Consider and respond to two lead-in questions in terms of China's metro development and its global status	T/Ss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To activate Ss' awareness and prior knowledge of China's development and Metro advances • To facilitate Ss awareness of understanding China's metro development in a global context
Viewing and Thinking	1) View an academic research presentation on China's metros and note key points	T/Ss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To enable Ss to critically understand an international academic presentation on China's development in a global context • To enable Ss to understand language beyond its literal meaning
	2) Debate whether the speaker presents a balanced perspective of China's metros, how and why?	Ss/Ss GroupsT/ Ss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To enable Ss to consider the balanced issues and mechanisms in an academic report
	3) Listen to an interview with the presenter to understand meaningful issues from his perspective	T/Ss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To enable Ss to compare and contrast their views and those of the presenter
Reading and Thinking	1) Appraisal of blog review (Nanning Metro)	T/Ss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To facilitate Ss understanding and investigate the blog review • To enable Ss to understand expressions and words within a specific context
	2) Assess if a balanced perspective is presented within the blog, addressing how and why this occurs	Ss/Ss GroupsT/ Ss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To enable Ss to consider issues of bias within a blog review.
Writing and Thinking	1) Reference the presentation/blog review to consider the key structure of creating a balanced argument	Ss/Ss GroupsT/ Ss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To support Ss in comparing a balanced and biased example • To consider the features of balanced arguments.

	2) Deliver a lecture to illustrate the skills and structures of writing balanced arguments	T&Ss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To enable Ss to understand the structure and skills of writing a balanced argument.
	3) Assign a follow-up project to write a statement on the impact of metros on China's cities	Ss/Ss GroupsT/Ss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To enable Ss to apply a balanced argument approach.

Table 1 Lesson plan

It can be seen that the thread of metro expansion in China and its role in our nation's development progresses through the unit, offering both balanced and biased views and culminating in a thoroughly assessed balanced approach to the questions and issues raised. The lesson plan featured different aspects of the metro development story, highlighting its significance in China's modernization and connecting it to broader cultural and historical contexts. This approach helped students relate the learning material to their own cultural background, enhancing their understanding and engagement.

Teaching Strategies and student engagement

A variety of teaching strategies are employed to incorporate ethnic narratives and promote student participation:

a. Multimedia Resources to create ethnic narrative space

As shown in Table 2, the initial step in creating this ethnic narrative space involves inviting a renowned expert from the UK who has a comprehensive study in Chinese metro development to deliver a video lecture. This expert, possessing a deep understanding and extensive experience in the field, presents an overview of the historical and cultural significance of the metro systems across various Chinese cities. The video lecture not only outlines the technological advancements and architectural achievements but also delves into how these developments mirror shifts in cultural practices and urban lifestyles in modern China.

Following the video lecture, students are directed to read a selection of posts from the expert's blog, where he shares more nuanced views and detailed analyses of specific metro projects and their impacts on local communities. This activity is designed to deepen students' understanding by exposing them to a broader range of discussions about urban development and its implications on everyday life. Leveraging the knowledge gained from the video and blog readings, students are tasked with comparing the different perspectives presented. This comparative analysis helps students critically evaluate the content, encouraging them to identify not just the factual descriptions of metro development but also the underlying narratives about progress, tradition, and identity as conveyed through the expert's lens. To further enhance engagement and allow for an interactive learning experience, a live interview session with the expert is arranged. This real-time interaction facilitates direct communication between students and the expert, enabling students to ask questions, clarify doubts, and discuss their insights. Such direct engagement is invaluable as it not only personalizes the learning experience but also promotes active participation and deeper immersion into the subject matter.

Resources	Description	Educational Objectives
Expert Video Lecture	A renowned expert in Chinese metro development gives a detailed video lecture on the historical and cultural aspects of China's metro systems.	Introduce students to the technological and cultural evolution of metro systems in China.
Engagement with Expert's Blog	Students read various posts from the expert's blog, which offer detailed analyses of metro projects and their impact on local communities.	Deepen understanding of specific projects and broaden perspective on urban development.
Comparative Analysis	Students compare perspectives and information from the video lecture and blog posts to evaluate different views on metro developments.	Develop critical thinking by analyzing and contrasting various viewpoints.
Real-Time Interview with the Expert	A live interview session is arranged, allowing students to interact directly with the expert, facilitating real-time questions and discussions.	Enhance engagement and allow direct exploration of topics with an expert.

Table 2 Multimedia resources to create ethnic narrative space

The integration of these multimedia resources creates a rich ethnic narrative space that not only informs students about a significant aspect of Chinese culture but also encourages them to engage with it actively. Through this dynamic approach, students gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic, enhanced by their direct interaction with an expert in the field. This method also fosters critical thinking and effective communication skills, essential competencies in intercultural education.

b. Translanguaging use to assist ethnic narratives

Translanguaging refers to the process by which bilingual or multilingual speakers utilize and alternate between their languages for effective communication and comprehension. In educational settings, this practice can significantly enhance the learning experience, particularly in contexts involving complex interdisciplinary content. The use of translanguaging in the provided talk is a strategic pedagogical choice that facilitates understanding and connects the ethnic narrative of China's metro development with broader context. For example,

T: he(S8-) mentioned economic and convenience.

OK, here is build, not built, help 后面加的是动词原形哈, we sell the technology to the world, 那么这其中肯定有经济利益, 而这样其实也是双向的, 因为其他国家可以 benefit from this technology, 这样世界才会变得更好。在语法上注意一下, 我发现你这里有 passive voice, 被动语态只有在被动的时候才会出现, 如果你想表示现在完成进行时的话……这里也用到了上节课用到的 leap frog, 因为我国的 metro 事业并不是 gradually 的, 而是快速的发展的……

Tr. He(S8-) mentioned economic and convenience.

OK, here is build, not built, help **should be followed by the base form of the verb**, we sell the technology to the world. **Therefore, there must be economic benefits, and this is actually two-way, because other countries** can benefit from this technology, **making the world a better place. In terms of grammar, take note that I found** passive voice here, **which should only be used when it is passive. If you want to express the present perfect continuous tense**… **This also uses the leapfrog concept we discussed in the last lesson, because the development of our metro industry is not gradual but rather rapid**…

This teacher talk is a feedback after student response about the benefits of metro development. The teacher switches between English and Chinese terms to clarify and emphasize key concepts. For instance, the reference to “economic and convenience” alongside the correction and explanation in Chinese helps students better grasp the fundamental reasons behind the development of the metro systems. This bilingual approach caters to students’ varying proficiencies in English and Chinese, ensuring comprehension across different linguistic backgrounds. The mention of “leap frog” in reference to the rapid development of China's metro system employs a metaphor previously discussed in class. This not only reinforces the learning but also culturally contextualizes how China’s development differs from more gradual approaches seen in other contexts. The teacher uses both English and Chinese to draw these cultural comparisons, enriching the students' understanding of China's unique developmental narrative.

In addressing grammar, the teacher points out the correct forms and structures in English, such as the use of the passive voice and verb forms after “help.” This not only serves as language instruction but also subtly reinforces the narrative by focusing on the active roles China has taken in technology and economic development (“we sell the technology to the world”). The use of both languages to explain grammatical concepts helps bridge linguistic and conceptual gaps. The translanguaging strategy is also evident in how the teacher discusses the dual benefits of China’s advancements — for China and for other countries (“因为其他国家可以 benefit from this technology”). This bilingual expression underlines the mutual advantages and global impact of China's technological growth, making the narrative accessible and relatable to students from diverse backgrounds.

By fluidly moving between languages, the teacher creates a more inclusive and interactive classroom environment. This approach encourages students to engage with the content more freely in whichever language they feel most comfortable, promoting a deeper discussion of the economic narratives linked to ethnic and national identities. Overall, the teacher’s use of translanguaging in this context not only aids in linguistic understanding but also enhances the ethnic narratives by providing a richer, more nuanced view of China’s metro development. This approach highlights the interplay between language learning and content learning, where students are not just passive receivers of knowledge but active participants in constructing and understanding complex global and cultural dynamics.

Discussion and Conclusion

This reflective case study explores the integration of ethnic narratives into the EFL curriculum at a Chinese university, focusing on a thematic unit about China's metro development. The findings provide significant insights into the benefits of culturally relevant teaching materials and methodologies, enhancing our understanding of how such integration influences student engagement and learning outcomes.

As indicated by Uzum et al. , the traditional representation of cultures in educational materials often suffers from oversimplification and essentialization^[6]. Contrary to this, the current study’s approach of using China's metro development as a core theme demonstrates a dynamic method of presenting complex and fluid cultural identities. This method not only aligns with the criticisms presented by Uzum et al. but also effectively counters the homogeneous depiction of cultures by showcasing the nuances of China’s urban development and its global implications. This thematic approach has proven effective in fostering a deeper understanding among students about their national history and development, similar to the benefits highlighted by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou^[7]. These authors

emphasized that ethnic narratives enhance comprehension of complex cultural histories, which was evident in students' engagement with the multi-layered aspects of the metro development narrative.

Secondly, the use of multimedia resources, such as expert lectures and interactive blogs, significantly deepened students' engagement with the material, a finding that supports the arguments by Rachel Paterson regarding the impact of culturally responsive curricula. These resources allowed students to explore various perspectives and critically engage with content, fostering skills necessary for both academic success and intercultural competence^[8]. Moreover, the real-time interactions with experts not only personalized the learning experience but also mirrored the collaborative learning benefits noted by Eliyahu-Levi^[11]. Such interactions are crucial for developing students' ability to navigate and appreciate diverse viewpoints, thereby enhancing their social skills and emotional intelligence towards different cultures. The structured critical engagement activities, such as the comparative analyses of different perspectives on metro development, align closely with the educational objectives of promoting critical thinking and balanced argumentation skills. This pedagogical strategy echoes Coryell, Clark, and Pomerantz's findings on the effectiveness of narrative integration in fostering multilingual and cultural identities, as students were encouraged to synthesize information critically and reflect on their biases and assumptions^[9].

Additionally, the translanguaging practices observed in the classroom facilitated a more inclusive and accessible learning environment, corroborating the benefits discussed in the literature regarding the use of students' first languages in EFL teaching. This bilingual strategy not only supported comprehension but also enriched the students' engagement with the ethnic narratives, reinforcing their cultural identities and enhancing the overall educational experience. The findings from this case study confirm and extend the insights from previous research into the integration of ethnic narratives in language education. By employing culturally relevant themes, diverse multimedia resources, and translanguaging practices, educators can significantly improve student engagement, critical thinking abilities, and intercultural competence. These strategies not only make the learning process more effective but also prepare students to participate more fully in a globalized world, equipped with a better understanding of both their own and others' cultural narratives.

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