



Exploring Thai university students' perceptions and preferences on culture integration in EFL classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the integration of cultural content into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms and its effects on students' perceptions and preferences. By using a Likert scale questionnaire, the research assesses students' views on the advantages of incorporating cultural elements and explores how factors such as faculty affiliation, gender, and age affect these perceptions and preferences. The findings indicate a general appreciation for cultural integration, especially for its role in enhancing cultural sensitivity, broadening perspectives, and improving various language skills. However, the impact on critical thinking and language acquisition was less pronounced. Faculty affiliation notably influences students' perceptions, with those majoring in languages, business, and information technology (IT) showing the highest agreement on the benefits of cultural content integration. Gender did not significantly impact preferences for culture-related activities, suggesting a consistent appreciation across genders. Age was positively associated with perceptions of improved communication skills. The study highlights the need for tailored approaches to integrating cultural content in EFL curricula and recommends further research on the effects of culture-related activities on critical thinking and language acquisition.

KEYWORDS

culture, culture content, culture learning, culture integration, EFL, language learning

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INTRODUCTION

In the realm of EFL education, integrating cultural elements has become increasingly recognized as essential for enhancing language learning and fostering intercultural competence among students. Culture integration involves incorporating diverse cultural perspectives, practices, and contexts into language teaching to enrich students' understanding of both language and culture (Byram & Feng, 2004). This approach not only facilitates language acquisition but also prepares students to navigate global interactions in an interconnected world (Ware & Kramsch, 2005).

Understanding Thai university students' perspectives on cultural content integration in EFL classrooms is particularly relevant, given Thailand's growing emphasis on internationalization and the need for graduates to possess intercultural skills for global competitiveness. Thai universities, including Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna

(RMUTL) Phitsanulok, recognize the significance of integrating cultural components into their EFL curricula to equip students with the necessary cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Some research studies suggest that exposure to cultural content materials can significantly enhance students' intercultural competence by fostering empathy, understanding cultural diversity, and adapting communication styles across various cultural contexts (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Byram, 1997). Moreover, engaging with cultural topics in language learning can deepen students' linguistic proficiency by allowing them to encounter authentic language use embedded within cultural contexts.

While existing works provide insights into the benefits of culture integration in EFL settings (Elola & Oskoz, 2009; Baker, 2012), there remain some concerns about how Thai university students perceive and experience these initiatives. Specifically, there is limited exploration into their attitudes toward the effectiveness, relevance, and impact of cultural integration activities within their specific educational context. Therefore, this study aims to explore how the students of RMUTL Phitsanulok perceive the integration of cultural contents in their EFL classrooms and the implications for their language learning and intercultural competence development. Insights gained from this exploration can inform educational practices and curriculum development strategies to better meet the cultural and linguistic needs of Thai university students in EFL settings.

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To determine Thai university students' perceptions of integrating cultural content materials in EFL classrooms;
2. To identify students' preferred activities for integrating culture content materials with the four English skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) in EFL classrooms; and
3. To explore the relationships between students' gender, age, faculty affiliation, and their perceptions of cultural integration and preferences for cultural content activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review critically examines the significance and methodologies of cultural integration in EFL education, particularly focusing on its impact on language learning outcomes and students' ability to navigate diverse cultural contexts. By categorizing the discussion around key themes, such as the importance of cultural integration, methodologies employed, the effect on language skills, and contextual factors, the review aims to provide a nuanced understanding of this crucial area of EFL pedagogy.

Importance of integrating culture in EFL classrooms

The integration of culture into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has become increasingly recognized as a vital component of effective language pedagogy. This approach

enhances students' linguistic proficiency and cultivates intercultural competence, enabling them to navigate and appreciate diverse cultural contexts. Evidence from educational practice indicates that a culturally rich curriculum significantly enriches the learning experience, equipping students with the tools to communicate effectively in a globalized world.

Extensive research stresses the significance of embedding cultural elements within EFL curricula. Byram (1997) argues that integrating culture in language education not only develops linguistic skills but also fosters meaningful engagement with various cultural contexts. This perspective aligns with Kramsch's (1993) assertion that language learning is inherently linked to cultural understanding, as effective communication demands an awareness of cultural nuances. Observations in classroom settings reveal that students engaging with cultural content demonstrate increased motivation and a deeper connection to the language, perceiving it as a living, evolving means of communication.

Byram (2008) further emphasizes that cultural integration in language teaching promotes intercultural communicative competence (ICC), encompassing the skills necessary for effective interaction across cultures. Authentic cultural materials and practices in EFL classes are crucial for this goal, as they provide students with practical experiences that enhance cultural awareness. Incorporating literature, music, and multimedia from diverse cultures broadens students' horizons while instilling a sense of empathy and curiosity about the world.

Numerous methodologies have been proposed for effectively integrating culture into EFL classrooms. Corbett (2003) advocates for a task-based approach, where students engage in culturally relevant tasks that facilitate meaningful language use and understanding. Activities such as role-plays, discussions on cultural topics, and analysis of cultural texts empower students to practice language skills in contexts that mirror real-world interactions. Such culturally contextualized activities often lead to more authentic and engaging language acquisition.

Additionally, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) propose an intercultural language teaching approach that incorporates both explicit and implicit cultural instruction. This dual strategy, which includes direct teaching of cultural content alongside language use in culturally relevant contexts, fosters a comprehensive understanding of cultural practices. Evidence from educational settings suggests that students who engage in both types of instruction develop not only linguistic proficiency but also critical thinking skills regarding cultural differences.

Despite the acknowledged benefits of cultural integration, several challenges remain in its implementation. Limitations such as inadequate resources, insufficient teacher training, and rigid curricula that prioritize linguistic accuracy over cultural relevance can hinder effective integration (Sercu, 2006; Liddicoat, 2007). Many educators encounter these challenges, necessitating creative problem-solving to adapt lessons that authentically represent cultural contexts. Addressing these systemic issues is essential; educational institutions must prioritize professional development for teachers and advocate for more

flexible curricular frameworks that encompass cultural learning alongside language proficiency.

Integrating culture in EFL classrooms is crucial for developing both linguistic and intercultural competencies among students. By utilizing authentic cultural materials and engaging learners in culturally relevant tasks, educators can create meaningful language learning experiences that prepare students for effective communication in an increasingly interconnected world. The methodologies presented in the literature offer valuable frameworks for implementing cultural integration in EFL education, yet addressing the challenges faced by educators is equally important to ensure the success of these initiatives.

Integrating culture in the four skills in EFL classrooms

The integration of culture into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has become increasingly recognized as a vital component of effective language pedagogy. This approach enhances students' linguistic proficiency and cultivates intercultural competence, enabling them to navigate and appreciate diverse cultural contexts. Evidence from educational practice indicates that a culturally rich curriculum significantly enriches the learning experience, equipping students with the tools to communicate effectively in a globalized world.

Listening skill

Integrating audio resources from diverse cultural contexts is essential for enhancing listening comprehension and intercultural awareness among EFL learners. Al-Rifa'i et al. (2021) emphasize the efficacy of such resources in creating authentic listening experiences. Field (2008) further supports this notion, highlighting the significance of authentic listening materials that expose students to natural spoken language and cultural nuances. This exposure is particularly beneficial for EFL students who aim to understand real-world language use. Additionally, Summer (2019) recommends the analysis of audio literature from various cultural backgrounds, which aids students in gaining multifaceted cultural perspectives and enriching their listening skills.

Reading skill

In the realm of reading, the use of culturally relevant texts is recommended to enhance students' engagement and comprehension. Jenkins (2010) and Choudhury and Kakati (2017) advocate for selecting texts that resonate with students' backgrounds, thereby providing relatable and meaningful contexts. Duff and Polio (1990) further argue that culturally embedded reading materials improve overall comprehension and foster greater engagement. Hammerly (1982) notes that authentic cultural texts not only enhance compre-

hension but also encourage discussions around cultural diversity, motivating students to explore and respect a variety of worldviews.

Writing skill

Culturally themed writing tasks are noted for their effectiveness in fostering critical thinking and articulate expression. Hyland (2003) emphasizes that culturally focused writing encourages students to engage critically with intercultural contexts. Building on this, Dai (2011) proposes collaborative projects centered on cultural topics, which not only enhance writing skills but also promote teamwork and deeper cultural reflection. These collaborative endeavors enable students to articulate their ideas on culturally relevant themes, thereby improving their overall writing proficiency.

Speaking skill

For speaking proficiency, role-plays and discussions centered on cultural topics serve as effective methods for promoting both linguistic and intercultural competencies. Al-Rifa'i et al. (2021) and Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) suggest that engaging in activities such as debates and role-plays immerses students in culturally rich scenarios, ultimately improving their fluency and intercultural competence. Lázár (2003) underscores the value of contrasting cultural practices through discussions and role-plays, which fosters an appreciation of cultural diversity and enhances the practical application of English in various contexts.

Collectively, these studies underscore the critical importance of incorporating cultural activities into EFL learning. Such integration not only enriches language acquisition but also prepares students to communicate effectively and respectfully in a multicultural world.

Faculty affiliation, gender, and age vs. integration of culture in EFL classrooms

Effective integration of cultural content in EFL classrooms is crucial for enhancing students' intercultural competence and improving language learning outcomes. Research highlights that students' academic backgrounds, gender, and age significantly impact how cultural content is incorporated and engaged with in EFL instruction.

Faculty affiliation

The effective integration of cultural content in EFL classrooms is significantly influenced by students' academic backgrounds. Choudhury (2013) examines the implications, challenges, and strategies for teaching culture, highlighting the necessity of adapting pedagogical methods to align with students' academic contexts. Yan and Jing (2023) provide insights into successful strategies for incorporating cultural content in Chinese junior high schools,

emphasizing that educational practices tailored to specific contexts can greatly enhance cultural learning outcomes. Dervin (2010) reviews various assessment methods for intercultural competence, advocating for cultural integration approaches that account for the diverse academic backgrounds of students. It becomes evident that recognizing and addressing the unique academic profiles of learners fosters a more relevant and impactful integration of cultural content in EFL instruction.

Gender

Gender differences play a pivotal role in shaping how cultural content is integrated within EFL classrooms. Montero-Saiz (2019) finds that female EFL learners tend to utilize a wider range of language learning strategies and engage more deeply with cultural material compared to their male counterparts. This observation suggests the necessity for tailored cultural integration approaches that accommodate diverse learning preferences. Supporting this perspective, Oxford (2003) indicates that gender significantly affects language learning strategies, subsequently impacting how learners interact with cultural content. A nuanced understanding of these gender dynamics can lead to more effective instructional strategies that cater to the distinct needs and preferences of all students.

Age

Age is another critical factor influencing the integration of cultural content in EFL education. Al-Issa (2005) observe that younger learners benefit from culturally relevant and age-appropriate activities, emphasizing the need for content that aligns with their developmental stages to sustain engagement and enhance learning outcomes. Thieu (2019) further underscores this by demonstrating that integrating cross-cultural knowledge with listening skills instruction enhances students' intercultural communication competence. The implications are clear: adopting age-appropriate pedagogical strategies is vital for maintaining student interest and fostering meaningful cultural understanding.

Overall, the integration of cultural content in EFL classrooms is intricately influenced by various factors, including academic background, gender, and age. Addressing these factors through adaptable and contextually relevant pedagogical practices can significantly enhance the effectiveness of cultural integration and cater to the diverse learning needs of students. By recognizing the complex interplay of these elements, educators can create a more inclusive and impactful EFL learning environment.

Integration of cultural contents in Thai EFL classrooms

Incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into EFL curricula not only enriches learning experiences but also provides essential contextual relevance. Within the Thai context, there is a recognized and pressing need for better integration of cultural content into foreign

language teaching (FLT). Despite the acknowledged importance of cultural integration, current practices often fall short of creating meaningful connections for learners. Effective integration requires comprehensive curriculum reforms and enhanced teacher training to elevate students' language proficiency and prepare them for global communication (Kaewsaard, 2018). For instance, observations suggest that students engage more enthusiastically when lessons are designed around culturally relevant themes, reflecting their own experiences and identities. This connection can significantly enhance motivation and participation.

Moreover, incorporating elements of global English usage into Thai EFL contexts equips students with the necessary skills to navigate real-world language applications and develop essential intercultural competencies, thus making EFL instruction more relevant and effective (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2021). The realization that students are better prepared for the complexities of global communication when exposed to diverse cultural contexts is vital. This approach not only fosters language proficiency but also nurtures a broader understanding of the world.

Recent studies underscore the significant advantages of embedding intercultural communication components into EFL instruction. For example, research focused on online EFL classrooms demonstrates that culture-centric activities markedly enhance students' cross-cultural communication abilities and understanding of diverse cultures (Lee et al., 2023). Such findings highlight the necessity of incorporating intercultural components in EFL curricula to foster both language proficiency and intercultural skills. Reflecting on this, it becomes evident that the inclusion of cultural activities fosters a deeper engagement, prompting learners to think critically about their interactions with others.

An analysis of EFL materials from an English as an International Language (EIL) perspective reveals that while certain resources include cultural elements, they often lack the diversity and depth necessary for comprehensive learning. Enhancing these materials to reflect a broader spectrum of cultural perspectives can significantly benefit learners' intercultural competence (Rattanawong & Thongrin, 2023). This aligns with the view that educational materials should not merely represent culture as an add-on but rather as an integral part of language learning. Such integration ensures that students are not only learning a language but also understanding the cultural nuances that accompany it.

A more holistic approach to embedding cultural content could improve students' intercultural competence and overall effectiveness in language education (Snodin, 2015). Current critiques of culture-teaching practices suggest that while cultural elements are included, they frequently lack depth and meaningful connections to students' lived experiences. This underscores the importance of selecting materials that resonate with students' realities, allowing them to engage in discussions that reflect their cultural backgrounds.

Baker (2003) emphasizes that the explicit inclusion of cultural components in EFL instruction serves to bridge the gap between language and culture, thereby improving students' communication skills and intercultural competence by providing necessary context and relevance. This perspective is reinforced by systematic reviews on the integration of local

culture into EFL teaching in Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, which indicate that embedding local cultural elements significantly enhances students' engagement and attitudes toward learning English (Ratri et al., 2024). The connection between local culture and language instruction fosters a sense of belonging and relevance, vital for effective learning.

Additionally, research by Kimsuvan (2004) on FLT in Northern Thailand illustrates the influence of local cultural factors on teaching methods and student outcomes. This study highlights the necessity for regional adaptations to better address specific educational needs. Strategies that integrate local culture into English instruction for young learners demonstrate that blending local cultural awareness with global English proficiency can improve student engagement and comprehension (Kanoksilapatham, 2015). Such insights advocate for an educational framework that respects and incorporates students' cultural identities, thereby enhancing the overall learning experience.

In summary, these insights collectively emphasize the critical importance of integrating cultural content into EFL classrooms in Thailand to enhance both language proficiency and intercultural competence. The commitment to cultural integration not only enriches the educational experience but also prepares students for effective communication in an increasingly interconnected world. By fostering an environment where cultural exploration is at the forefront, educators can ensure that language learning is both relevant and transformative for students.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology section outlines the systematic approach used to meet the study's objectives: assessing Thai university students' perceptions of cultural integration in EFL classrooms, identifying preferred activities for integrating cultural content with the four English skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), and exploring the influence of students' faculty, gender, and age, on these perceptions and preferences.

Research setting and participants

The study was conducted at RMUTL Phitsanulok, a provincial institution and one of six campuses located in the Central region of Thailand, while the remaining campuses are situated in Northern Thailand. The research took place between July and September 2023. A total of 180 undergraduate students from the 2022-2023 academic year participated, representing first, second, and third-year levels. Participants were evenly distributed across three faculties: Business Administration and Liberal Arts (BALA), Engineering (ENG), and Science and Agricultural Technology (SAT), utilizing simple random sampling. This sampling method ensures that each member of the population has an equal chance of selection. Given the even distribution of the population, this approach is likely to yield a representative sample, minimizing potential bias.

The Faculty of BALA includes majors in English, Business Administration, and Information Technology (IT). The Faculty of ENG offers majors in Electrical, Mechanical, and Industrial Engineering. The Faculty of SAT encompasses various programs, including Animal, Plant, Fishery, and Food Sciences, and Agricultural and Food Technology. Additionally, all these students were enrolled in minor English courses as part of their academic programs.

Data collection instrument

The study employed a questionnaire which is divided into three parts to address each objective:

Part 1. Demographic Information: This section gathers essential demographic data, including participants' age, gender, and faculty affiliation. Collecting demographic information is crucial for understanding the diversity within the sample and allows for the analysis of potential correlations between demographic variables and students' perceptions of cultural integration. Research has shown that demographic factors can significantly influence language learning experiences and attitudes (Oxford, 2003; Montero-Saiz, 2021). This part provides the foundational context for interpreting the results.

Part 2. Perceptions of Culture Integration Contents: The second part assesses participants' views on the incorporation of cultural content into their EFL classes. Using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), this part enables a nuanced understanding of how students perceive the relevance and effectiveness of cultural integration in their language learning. Previous studies have emphasized that positive perceptions of cultural integration can enhance students' engagement and motivation in language learning (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993). This section aligns with the study's objective to explore the impact of cultural content on students' linguistic and intercultural competence.

Part 3. Preferences for Cultural Integration Activities: The final part investigates students' preferences for various cultural integration activities within their EFL classes. Responses are also rated on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly dislike) to 5 (strongly like). Understanding students' preferences is vital for designing effective instructional practices that resonate with learners. Research indicates that culturally relevant and preferred activities can lead to improved engagement and language outcomes (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Dai, 2011). This part of the questionnaire directly addresses the objective of identifying effective cultural integration strategies that align with students' interests.

The questionnaire utilized in this study was meticulously developed by the researchers, drawing upon insights from previous research to specifically address three key objectives: examining demographic information, assessing perceptions of cultural integration, and identifying preferences for cultural integration activities within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes.

To ensure the content validity of the questionnaire, a rigorous review process was implemented. Three experts evaluated the questionnaire items: two native English-speaking

EFL lecturers and one Thai English lecturer holding assistant professor status at the university. All experts possessed substantial expertise in linguistics and extensive experience teaching culture-related subjects. Their evaluations focused on the relevance and clarity of the items, as well as their alignment with the study's objectives.

The feedback provided by these experts was instrumental in refining the questionnaire, ensuring it was effectively tailored to the study's purpose. This method aligns with established practices in educational research, where expert review is a critical step in validating assessment tools (Linder et al., 2001; Polit & Beck, 2012). By involving experts in the field, the researchers enhanced the questionnaire's potential to yield reliable and meaningful data regarding students' cultural integration experiences in EFL classrooms.

This comprehensive approach not only emphasizes the importance of validity in research instruments but also reflects a commitment to producing high-quality, contextually relevant educational research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fraenkel et al., 2012).

A pilot test was conducted with a small sample of participants who shared similar characteristics with the study population. The pilot test yielded a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.79, indicating a satisfactory level of internal consistency. This validation process strengthened the questionnaire's reliability and credibility, confirming its effectiveness in gathering pertinent data on students' demographics, perceptions, and preferences related to cultural integration in EFL instruction.

Data analyses

Data from the completed questionnaires were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and sums, provided an overview of the responses. To investigate relationships between variables such as faculty, gender, and age with students' perceptions and preferences, Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was employed to assess between-group differences. Additionally, Spearman's rank correlation analyses were conducted to evaluate the strength and direction of relationships among variables.

RESULTS

This section presents the results from the analysis of the data collected to address the study's objectives regarding the integration of culture contents in EFL classrooms. The results provide insights into Thai university students' views on cultural integration, their preferred activities for combining cultural content with language skills, and how demographic factors such as faculty affiliation, gender, and age influence these perceptions and preferences. Descriptive statistics, MANOVA, and Spearman rank correlation analyses were utilized to present a comprehensive understanding of these aspects and their implications for enhancing cultural integration in EFL classrooms.

Demographic information

Understanding the demographic characteristics of the participants is essential for contextualizing the findings of this study. This section outlines key demographic factors that may influence the perceptions and preferences regarding cultural integration in EFL classes. This study engaged 180 students from three faculties—Faculty of BALA, Faculty of ENG, and Faculty of SAT—with 60 respondents from each faculty. The participant pool comprised 56.57% females and 43.43% males. In terms of age distribution, 50.56% of the respondents were 19 years old, 30% were 20 years old, 13.33% were 21 years old, and over 6% were between the ages of 22 and 25.

The diverse age, gender, and academic backgrounds of participants provide a comprehensive view that enhances the understanding of cultural integration preferences and perceptions among EFL students.

Table 1. The demographic profiles of the participants

<i>Faculty</i>	n	%
BALA	60	33.33%
ENG	60	33.33%
SAT	60	33.33%
TOTAL	180	100%

<i>Gender</i>		
Female	102	56.57%
Male	78	43.43%
TOTAL	180	100%

<i>Age</i>		
19	91	50.56%
20	54	30%
21	24	13.33%
22	4	2.22%
23	3	1.67%
24	2	1.11%
25	1	0.56%
TOTAL	180	100%

Perceptions of cultural content integration

Table 2 summarizes the participants' responses regarding the various benefits of integrating cultural content into EFL classrooms. The data includes mean scores and standard deviations, along with interpretations based on a Likert scale.

Table 2. Perceived benefits of integrating cultural content in EFL classes

<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Mean (M)</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
1. Promote cultural sensitivity and respect	4.51	0.53	Strongly agree
2. Broaden perspectives	4.02	0.46	Agree
3. Foster intercultural competence	3.96	0.66	Agree
4. Enhance communication skills	3.95	0.70	Agree
5. Enhance language learning	3.91	0.62	Agree
6. Increase motivation and engagement	3.88	0.67	Agree
7. Encourage critical thinking	3.40	0.52	Agree
8. Support language acquisition	3.25	0.49	Neither agree nor disagree
TOTAL	3.86	0.58	Agree

The perceptions of students regarding the benefits of integrating cultural content in their EFL classrooms suggest a generally positive attitude, indicated by a mean score of 3.86. This finding demonstrates that students recognize the advantages of cultural integration, although enthusiasm may be moderate.

A notable observation is the highest mean score of 4.51 ($SD = 0.53$) for the statement asserting that integrating cultural content promotes cultural sensitivity and respect. This strong agreement underscores the significance students attribute to cultural understanding as a crucial element of EFL education. Further support for this view is seen in mean scores for statements indicating that cultural integration broadens perspectives ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.46$) and fosters intercultural competence ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.66$). These results highlight perceived benefits in expanding worldviews and developing the skills necessary for effective intercultural interactions (Byram, 1997; Dervin, 2010).

Moreover, students identified cultural content as beneficial for enhancing communication skills ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.70$) and enriching language learning ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.62$). They also noted that cultural integration increases motivation and engagement ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.67$) and encourages critical thinking ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.52$), although the latter is perceived to be less impactful. Interestingly, the perceived benefit of cultural content in supporting language acquisition was rated neutrally ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.49$), suggesting a less definitive impact in this area.

The overall mean score indicates general agreement with the objectives of integrating cultural content into EFL classrooms. Participants value this integration for its potential to promote cultural sensitivity, broaden perspectives, and enhance various aspects of language learning. However, the impact on specific areas, such as critical thinking and language acquisition, appears less clear, signaling a need for further exploration and potential enhancement in educational practice (Kramsch, 1993; Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

Preferences culture content integration activities

The overall mean score of 3.64 (SD = 0.48) suggests a positive inclination among students toward the incorporation of cultural content in their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. This indicates that learners appreciate the integration of cultural activities and perceive them as advantageous across different language learning areas.

The results indicate a general preference for integrating cultural content into various language skills, as reflected in the positive mean scores for all assessed activities, detailed in Table 3. Reading emerged as the most favored activity, with a mean score of 3.74 (SD = 0.52), indicating that students find cultural content particularly enriching when engaging with texts. Listening activities also received high approval, with a mean score of 3.70 (SD = 0.45), supporting the notion that exposure to cultural materials can enhance comprehension and retention (Baker, 2003). Writing and speaking activities were positively rated as well, with mean scores of 3.59 (SD = 0.49) and 3.52 (SD = 0.47), respectively, highlighting the multifaceted benefits of cultural integration across language competencies.

This trend of favoring cultural integration in language learning underscores the need for curriculum designers and educators to prioritize cultural content in EFL contexts to foster not only linguistic proficiency but also intercultural competence (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Integrating culture into language instruction not only enriches the educational experience but also prepares students for real-world communication in diverse contexts.

Table 3. Preferences for cultural integration activities in EFL classes

<i>Activities</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Reading	3.74	0.52	Like
Listening	3.70	0.45	Like
Writing	3.59	0.49	Like
Speaking	3.52	0.47	Like
TOTAL	3.64	0.48	Like

Relationships between demographic factors and perceptions of cultural integration

To investigate differences in perceptions among groups, a MANOVA was conducted with faculty affiliation as the independent variable and students' perceptions of cultural content integration in EFL classrooms as the dependent variables. Wilk's lambda revealed a significant multivariate main effect, $F_{(16, 340)} = 10.57, p < .001$.

Subsequent univariate analyses showed significant differences across all assessed goals: promoting cultural sensitivity ($F_{(2, 177)} = 12.2, p < 0.01$), broadening perspectives ($F_{(2, 177)} = 3.25, p < 0.05$), fostering intercultural competence ($F_{(2, 177)} = 23.35, p < 0.01$), enhancing communication skills ($F_{(2, 177)} = 22.81, p < 0.01$), improving language learning ($F_{(2, 177)} = 30.71, p < 0.01$), increasing motivation ($F_{(2, 177)} = 37.97, p < 0.01$), encouraging critical

thinking ($F_{(2, 177)} = 3.82, p < 0.05$), and supporting language acquisition ($F_{(2, 177)} = 9.98, p < 0.01$).

These findings reveal that faculty affiliation significantly influences students' perceptions of the benefits of integrating cultural content, highlighting the need for customized strategies that address the unique needs and perspectives of students from different faculties.

Table 4. Faculty and perceptions of cultural integration

<i>Benefits</i>	BALA		ENG		SAT		TOTAL
	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>
1. Promote cultural sensitivity and respect	4.77 _a	0.07	4.37 _b	0.07	4.38 _b	0.07	4.51
2. Broaden perspectives	4.08 _a	0.06	3.90 _b	0.06	4.08 _a	0.06	4.02
3. Foster intercultural competence	4.27 _a	0.08	4.05 _b	0.08	3.55 _c	0.08	3.96
4. Enhance communication skills	4.38 _a	0.08	3.82 _b	0.08	3.65 _c	0.08	3.95
5. Enhance language learning	4.33 _a	0.07	3.80 _b	0.07	3.58 _c	0.07	3.91
6. Increase motivation and engagement	4.38 _a	0.07	3.73 _b	0.07	3.52 _b	0.07	3.88
7. Encourage critical thinking	3.48 _a	0.06	3.25 _b	0.06	3.47 _a	0.06	3.40
8. Support language acquisition	3.23 _a	0.06	3.07 _b	0.06	3.45 _a	0.06	3.25

Note: Means on the same row with the same subscript do not differ using Scheffe post hoc analysis.

Table 4 illustrates that the goal of promoting cultural sensitivity and respect consistently receives the highest ratings across all faculties, reflecting a strong agreement on the importance of this objective. Notably, the Faculty of BALA constantly rates all goals higher compared to the other faculties, suggesting a more pronounced appreciation for the benefits of integrating cultural content in EFL classrooms. In contrast, the Faculty of ENG and Faculty of SAT display more moderate to low ratings on several goals, particularly regarding fostering intercultural competence and supporting language acquisition.

These findings indicate that students' perceptions of the benefits of cultural content integration in EFL classrooms vary significantly by faculty. The Faculty of BALA demonstrates the highest level of agreement overall, highlighting a more favorable view of the integration's advantages compared to the other faculties.

To examine differences in test scores by gender, a MANOVA was conducted with faculty as the independent variable and perceptions of integrating cultural content in EFL classrooms as the dependent variables. Wilk's lambda showed no significant effect, $F_{(8, 171)} = 0.21, p > .001$.

Follow-up tests confirmed that gender did not significantly affect perceptions of cultural content integration. Both male and female students have similar views on the importance and benefits of incorporating cultural content into EFL education.

A significant positive correlation was found between age and the perception of enhancing communication skills ($\rho = 0.16$, $p = .03$). No significant correlations were observed for other goals. Strong positive correlations were noted between promoting cultural sensitivity and respect with broadening perspectives ($\rho = 0.53$), encouraging critical thinking ($\rho = 0.86$), and supporting language acquisition ($\rho = 0.65$). Encouraging critical thinking was strongly correlated with supporting language acquisition ($\rho = 0.62$).

The results indicate several key relationships between age, the perception of enhancing communication skills, and various benefits of cultural content integration in EFL classrooms. There is a significant positive correlation between age and the perception of enhancing communication skills ($\rho = 0.16$, $p = .03$). This suggests that older students are more likely to perceive improvements in their communication skills as a result of cultural content integration in EFL classrooms. Apart from communication skills, age did not show significant correlations with other benefits, indicating that age does not significantly influence students' perceptions of other aspects of cultural content integration.

The findings also highlight the interrelated nature of various perceived benefits. Promoting cultural sensitivity and respect is strongly positively correlated with broadening perspectives ($\rho = 0.53$), encouraging critical thinking ($\rho = 0.86$), and supporting language acquisition ($\rho = 0.65$). This means that students who perceive cultural content as promoting cultural sensitivity and respect also tend to see it as broadening their perspectives, encouraging critical thinking, and supporting language acquisition. Additionally, encouraging critical thinking is strongly correlated with supporting language acquisition ($\rho = 0.62$), suggesting that students who feel that cultural content encourages critical thinking are also likely to believe it supports their language acquisition.

These findings highlight the importance of considering age when designing EFL curricula that integrate cultural content, as older students may perceive greater benefits in terms of communication skills. Furthermore, the strong interrelationships between various perceived benefits emphasize that promoting cultural sensitivity and respect can simultaneously foster other crucial aspects such as broadening perspectives, critical thinking, and language acquisition.

Relationships between demographic factors and preferred activities for cultural integration

A MANOVA was conducted to assess between-group differences in test scores with faculty as the independent variable and activities (listening, speaking, writing, and reading) as the dependent variables. Wilk's lambda revealed a significant multivariate effect, $F_{(8, 348)} = 12.14$, $p < .001$.

Follow-up tests indicated significant effects of faculty on listening ($F_{(2, 177)} = 7.75$, $p < .05$), speaking ($F_{(2, 177)} = 21.22$, $p < .001$), and writing activities ($F_{(2, 177)} = 18.21$, $p < .001$).

Specifically, students from the Faculty of BALA, as shown in Table 5, demonstrated a significantly stronger preference for these activities compared to their peers in the Faculty of ENG and Faculty of SAT.

These results suggest that faculty affiliation significantly influences students' preferences for integrating cultural content through listening, speaking, and writing activities in EFL classrooms.

Table 5. Faculty and Preferences for Cultural Integration Activities

<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Listening</i>		<i>Speaking</i>		<i>Writing</i>		<i>Reading</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
BALA	3.699 _a	.043	3.884 _a	.073	3.881 _a	.077	3.833	.088
ENG	3.644 _b	.074	3.223 _b	.073	3.238 _c	.077	3.767	.088
SAT	3.528 _c	.074	3.458 _b	.073	3.664 _b	.077	3.634	.088

Note: Means on the same column with the same subscript do not differ using Scheffe post hoc analysis.

MANOVA was performed to explore between-group differences in test scores, with gender as the independent variable and activities (listening, speaking, writing, and reading) as dependent variables. Wilk's lambda indicated no significant multivariate effect, $F_{(4, 175)} = 0.089$, $p > .001$.

Follow-up tests confirmed that gender had no significant effect on any of the activities. This indicates that gender does not significantly influence students' preferences for listening, speaking, writing, or reading activities related to cultural integration in EFL classrooms.

The correlation analysis found that age has a minimal impact on preferences for listening, speaking, and writing activities, with very weak correlations. However, age was negatively correlated with reading preferences ($\rho = -0.160$, $p = 0.032$), indicating older participants have slightly lower preferences for reading.

In terms of activity preferences, listening was weakly positively correlated with writing ($\rho = 0.167$, $p = 0.025$), but other correlations among activities were weak and generally not statistically significant. Notably, there was a weak negative correlation between writing and reading preferences ($\rho = -0.167$, $p = 0.025$).

Overall, age affects reading preferences but not other activities, while weak but significant correlations exist among different activity preferences.

Summary of the results and findings

1. Perceptions of Cultural Integration: Thai university students value integrating cultural content into EFL classrooms, particularly for promoting cultural sensitivity, broadening perspectives, and enhancing communication skills.
2. Preferred Activities: Reading and listening are preferred activities for integrating cultural content, with a general positive preference across all language skills.

3. Faculty Differences: Faculty affiliation influences perceptions and preferences, with the Faculty of BALA showing higher ratings and preferences for integrating cultural content compared to the Faculty of ENG and SAT.
4. Gender Differences: Gender does not significantly affect perceptions or preferences related to cultural integration in EFL classrooms.
5. Age Differences: Age has a minor influence on perceptions related to enhancing communication skills and preferences for listening activities.

These results and findings suggest that while cultural integration is broadly appreciated, specific preferences and perceptions vary by faculty and age, providing valuable insights for tailoring EFL teaching strategies to enhance the integration of cultural content.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this study reveal that RMUTL Phitsanulok students highly value the inclusion of cultural content in their EFL curricula, perceiving it as essential for fostering cultural sensitivity, expanding their perspectives, and enhancing their communication skills. This aligns with the literature that emphasizes the significance of integrating cultural content to improve students' cultural awareness and language proficiency. For instance, Cheewasukthaworn and Suwanarak (2017) highlight that Thai EFL teachers recognize the significant role of cultural content in enriching students' understanding of diverse cultures. Similarly, Kaewsa-ard (2018) asserts that incorporating cultural elements into EFL teaching is crucial for developing intercultural competence in a globalized context. Lee et al. (2023) further corroborate this view by emphasizing the positive impact of intercultural communicative competence in EFL classrooms, which promotes a comprehensive understanding of cultural nuances.

While the participants showed a general preference for integrating cultural content across various language skills, the impact of this integration on language acquisition and critical thinking was less pronounced. This raises important questions regarding the effectiveness of cultural content in these areas. Language acquisition is a complex process influenced by numerous factors, including individual learning styles, motivation, and prior knowledge. Cultural content can enhance engagement and context but may not directly translate to improved language skills for all students (Alptekin, 2002). The study's findings reflect that students may perceive cultural integration as supplementary, which can limit its effectiveness in language acquisition.

Similarly, critical thinking often requires explicit instruction and structured opportunities for analysis and evaluation. As highlighted by Zhang (2018), critical thinking is more effectively developed through targeted strategies rather than passive exposure to cultural content. The lower mean score for critical thinking in the current study suggests that without explicit pedagogical methods focused on critical engagement, the potential of cultural integration to foster analytical skills may remain underutilized (El Soufi & See, 2019).

The preference for reading and listening activities over writing and speaking further suggests that students may favor more straightforward learning tasks that directly enhance language proficiency. Tran and Seepho (2014) observed that students often prioritize traditional language skills, which may lead to less emphasis on cultural content that could enhance critical thinking. This is echoed by Nguyen (2017), who found that while cultural integration broadens perspectives, its direct impact on specific language skills can be inconsistent.

Moreover, the observed significant differences based on faculty affiliation warrant a deeper exploration into the underlying reasons for these variations. The Faculty of BALA's higher ratings for integrating cultural content compared to the Faculty of ENG and SAT suggest that differing curriculum structures, teaching methodologies, and student demographics may influence engagement levels. For instance, the Faculty of BALA might implement more experiential learning activities or collaborative projects that emphasize cultural immersion, thus fostering a more profound engagement with cultural content (Couture, 2021). In contrast, faculties with a more traditional curriculum might not prioritize cultural integration to the same extent, impacting student perceptions and engagement (Hernandez et al., 2021).

The absence of significant gender differences in perceptions of cultural integration indicates that cultural content is valued universally among students, irrespective of gender. This supports the findings of Hernandez et al. (2021), suggesting that cultural integration strategies should be inclusive. However, Montero-Saiz (2021) notes that female EFL learners may engage differently with cultural content, indicating a need for tailored approaches that accommodate diverse learning preferences.

Despite age having a minor influence on perceptions related to communication skills and preferences for listening activities, developing EFL teaching strategies that cater to diverse age groups while maintaining effective cultural integration remains essential. As Nguyen (2017) pointed out, preferences for culturally integrated activities tend to be stable across age groups, underscoring the importance of relevance in cultural content delivery.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that EFL curricula enhance the integration of cultural content to improve cultural sensitivity and broaden perspectives. Emphasizing preferred activities such as reading and listening can effectively engage students while bolstering their language skills. Faculty training should address varying perceptions and preferences across disciplines, particularly encouraging more cultural content integration in departments like ENG and SAT to match the high ratings seen in the Faculty of BALA. Additionally, incorporating age-appropriate cultural content and activities can cater to diverse student needs, particularly regarding communication skills and listening preferences. Ongoing research into the impact of cultural integration will be crucial for refining teaching strategies and adapting to the evolving needs of students.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study reveals that students generally value the integration of cultural content in EFL classrooms for its potential to foster cultural sensitivity, broaden perspectives, and enhance various language skills. This positive outlook indicates the perceived benefits of such integration in improving overall language learning experiences. However, the impact on specific areas, such as critical thinking and language acquisition, remains less pronounced. These findings suggest several implications for educators and curriculum developers.

Firstly, the general appreciation for cultural integration highlights its potential to significantly enhance the overall language learning experience. Therefore, including cultural content should be a priority in EFL curricula to foster cultural sensitivity and improve language skills. Nonetheless, the less pronounced impact on critical thinking and language acquisition suggests these areas may require more targeted approaches. This indicates a need for further research and innovative pedagogical strategies to incorporate cultural content in ways that explicitly support these skills.

To enhance this integration, educators can adopt several targeted strategies. Incorporating critical thinking exercises that analyze cultural texts can prompt students to engage deeply with diverse perspectives. For instance, case studies comparing cultural scenarios can encourage students to move beyond mere comprehension to application and evaluation, fostering critical skills (Baker, 2021; Facione, 2015).

Additionally, the variation in students' views based on faculty affiliation, particularly the high level of agreement from the Faculty of BALA, suggests that tailoring cultural content to align with the specific needs of different faculties can significantly enhance its relevance and effectiveness. For example, integrating international business case studies in a Business Administration program can be more engaging than generic cultural materials (Jenkins, 2007).

Age-related adjustments are also essential; younger students may benefit from multimedia resources, while older students might thrive with more complex discussions involving critical analysis of cultural phenomena (Gage & Berliner, 1998). Implementing project-based learning centered around cultural themes can facilitate collaborative skills and critical thinking, allowing students to apply their knowledge in practical contexts.

Gender-related findings suggest that cultural integration efforts can be designed to appeal broadly to both male and female students without the need for gender-specific modifications. This uniformity in preferences can simplify the development and implementation of cultural content in EFL curricula (Sunderland, 2000). Lastly, integrating listening, speaking, and writing activities within cultural content can make learning more dynamic, as seen in role-playing scenarios that require students to communicate in culturally relevant contexts (Lázár, 2003).

By addressing these varied needs and preferences, including the consideration of faculty-specific approaches and age-related adjustments, educators can create more inclusive and effective EFL programs that leverage the full potential of cultural integration. By

implementing these strategies, educators can foster a more effective and inclusive EFL curriculum that fully capitalizes on the benefits of cultural integration.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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