

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Impact mechanism of cultural identity on students' learning motivation in EMI teaching

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the impact mechanism of cultural identity on the learning motivation of English major students in the context of English Medium Instruction (EMI). Based on the social psychological model of second language acquisition and multicultural interaction theory, this study designs a questionnaire on students' learning motivation and cultural identity. At the same time, it explores the impact mechanism of cultural identity on learning motivation through linear regression analysis. The results of the survey conducted on 351 English major students showed that the final overall average evaluation of cultural identity of sophomore students was 3.237, and the overall average evaluation of cultural identity of junior students was 3.202. The average evaluation of learning motivation among sophomores and juniors is 3.408 and 3.414. Regression analysis further showed that the impact coefficient of cultural identity on learning motivation was 0.67, with significance $p < 0.001$. Based on research findings, EMI teaching should promote the coordinated development of students' cultural identity and learning motivation by creating a multicultural interactive environment, constructing inquiry-based classrooms, and integrating dual motivation guidance.

Keywords: English medium instruction; cultural identity; learning motivation; higher education

1. Introduction

English Medium Instruction (EMI) refers to the use of English as the teaching language to teach subject knowledge in the field of higher education, aiming to improve students' English application ability and international competitiveness. The core of EMI teaching lies in the integration of language and subject content. Its essence is not to simply superimpose English language courses and professional subject content, but to promote the coordination and cooperation of language skills and subject knowledge with practical social issues as the core, and to cultivate students' comprehensive abilities ^[1]. The EMI teaching model complies with the trend of internationalization of higher education, helps students access cutting-edge international knowledge, reduces information misunderstandings caused by language barriers, and enhances cross-cultural communication skills ^[2]. With the development of multiculturalism, the role of cultural identity in second language acquisition has become increasingly prominent. Learners identify with English

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culture on the basis of maintaining their own cultural identity, which has become an important issue faced by EMI teaching^[3]. In view of this, this study, based on the social psychological model and cultural interaction theory, explores the characteristics of students' cultural identification with target education in EMI environment, and analyzes its impact mechanism on students' learning motivation. This mechanism is mainly used to explore how different dimensions of cultural identity can differentially predict different types of learning motivation. The innovation of the research lies in the decomposition of English cultural identity from the perspectives of language, behavior, and values to conduct an in-depth analysis of the impact of different dimensional factors on students' learning motivation. The purpose of the research is to optimize EMI teaching practice and provide empirical basis for collaborative teaching of English language teaching and cultural literacy cultivation.

2. Theoretical foundation and research questions

2.1. Theoretical foundation

Based on social psychological theory, Canadian social psychologists, Gardner and Lambert, proposed the relationship between the motivation expansion method of foreign language learning and the construction of independent learning ability in 1972. This theory holds that learners' attitudes toward the target language group affect their learning motivation and purpose. Gardner and Lambert divided learning motivation in second language acquisition into integrative tendencies and instrumental tendencies. The former refers to learners learning a second language because they have a positive attitude towards the target language group and are interested in communicating with the target language group^[4]. The latter refers to learners pursuing the practical value and advantages of learning a language, thereby learning a second language. At the same time, changes in learners' attitudes toward the target language community are closely related to learning motivation and may affect learning results^[5]. Based on this theory, it can be inferred that engaging in cultural practice behavior identification can directly bring a sense of pleasure and belonging, thereby strongly stimulating internal interest; The deepening of value identification may strengthen the desire for deep communication with the target language culture, further consolidating the integrative tendency. Meanwhile, language identity is the universal foundation that supports instrumental motivations such as personal development and media information needs; At the same time, positive behavior and value identification can enhance confidence and depth in language use, thereby enhancing the efficacy of instrumental use.

In the context of globalization, with the flow of digital information, exchanges and conflicts between cultures have become more intense. College students living in contemporary times need to have the ability to understand and explore the differences and commonalities between different cultures. Foreign language learning is the core way for college students to contact the culture of other countries. Exposure to other diverse and complex cultures during second language acquisition can alleviate the conflict between local culture and second language culture and achieve two-way interaction^[6]. In teaching practice, language interaction and communication can achieve cross-cultural understanding. Through EMI teaching, students can equally understand and appreciate other cultures while maintaining their own cultural identity, and seek cross-cultural harmony, thereby forming cultural identity^[7].

2.2. Research issues

Based on the social psychological model of second language acquisition and the theory of language-culture interaction, cultural education is found to be of great significance in EMI teaching. The practice of EMI teaching emphasizes curriculum design and localization adjustment^[8]. Therefore, to achieve the goal of EMI teaching, it is necessary to analyze students' attitudes towards British and American culture in the current EMI teaching practice of students in colleges and universities. In EMI teaching, students must

gradually develop the ability to address practical social issues in English and develop thinking that coordinates language skills and subject content. To ensure the quality of EMI teaching, students' understanding and autonomy must be strengthened from the aspects of students' learning motivation and willingness to understand and solve problems ^[9]. Based on this, the research objective is to explore the following issues:

Q1: What is the overall situation of cultural identity and learning motivation among English major students in EMI environment?

Q2: Does overall cultural identity have a significant positive predictive effect on learning motivation?

Q3: What types of learning motivation are significantly predicted by different dimensions of cultural identity?

Based on the above three questions, the research will be validated through questionnaire surveys and empirical analysis methods. By analyzing the differentiated prediction paths of different cognitive dimensions on learning motivation, specific influencing mechanisms will be obtained, in order to refine the interactive relationship between cultural identity and learning motivation in English teaching.

3. Research methodologies

3.1. Research objects

This study takes the sophomore and junior English major students of X-University as the survey subjects. This university takes language subjects as its core and offers a variety of language teaching majors. The English major is a discipline with the most mature teaching system and foreign teacher resources in the school, and most courses adopt the EMI teaching model. After college students majoring in English enter the second or third grade of study, they have accumulated a certain amount of practical teaching experience and are no longer under pressure in social practice and employment. Therefore, it is easier for them to access British and American cultural content based on their own interests. At this time, students' learning motivations are more diverse and will have more research value. This study uses the WeChat public account to distribute questionnaires online to student subjects in mid-September 2025. Afterwards, it uses random sampling to select a sample of 391 students (accounting for 30% of the survey sample). To ensure the diversity of different samples, this study selects 117 students from the English Language and Literature major, 43 from the English Applied Linguistics major, 30 from the Translation major, and 24 from the Business English major. A total of 351 valid samples are finally recovered, with an effective recovery rate of 89.77%, including 185 sophomore students and 166 junior students.

3.2. Research methods and questionnaire design

This study collects questionnaire items on English learning motivation based on the fund project of the Social Psychology Survey on College Students' English Learning. The project survey results show that the types of English learning motivations of college students are divided into instrumental motivations such as going abroad and personal development, and cultural motivations such as interest, and include 12 questions ^[10]. The specific questionnaire is shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Student cultural identity questionnaire and learning motivation questionnaire in EMI teaching.

Cultural Identity Questionnaire (C)			Learning Motivation Questionnaire (M)		
Dimension	Number	Item	Dimension	Number	Item
Language identity (L)	C1	I like teachers teaching in English	Interest (I)	M1	I learn English because I enjoy it
	C2	I prefer reading English magazines or literary works		M2	I don't like English as a language
	C3	After years of studying English, I prefer it more		M3	My hobbies of English songs, movies, literary works, etc. have sparked my interest in English
	C4	I think interspersing English in daily communication is a normal phenomenon	Media information demand (D)	M4	I am learning English to better study other majors
	C5	I think the pronunciation and intonation of English are very beautiful		M5	I study English to better understand the development of the world's economy, technology, and other aspects
	C6	I have enjoyed some Western festivals		M6	Learning English well can give me a sense of achievement
	C7	I think Western cuisine is quite high-end	Personal development (P)	M7	Learning English well will give me a chance to find a good job in the future
	C8	I think Western clothing is more trendy		M8	English is a stepping stone on the path of life's progress
	C9	I think English culture has influenced modern Chinese culture		M9	Speaking fluent English is a symbol of education and cultivation
	C10	I yearn for the freedom and independence of Westerners	Go abroad (A)	M10	I am learning English to seek better opportunities for education and work abroad
Cultural behavioral identity (B)	C11	I like teachers introducing English and American culture during the teaching process		M11	I am learning English with the ultimate goal of immigrating abroad
	C12	I like the AA system when I go out to eat with friends		M12	I study English to personally experience the culture of English speaking countries

Based on **Table 1**, this study also designs a cultural identity questionnaire from three perspectives: language identity, behavioral identity, and value identity of English culture, including a total of 12 questions. All questionnaire items except M2 adopt the 5-level Likert scoring method to quantify the indicators. 1-5 respectively means strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. Item M2 adopts reverse scoring [11]. This study uses SPSS26.0 for data collection and analysis, and Cronbach's α coefficient is used to test the effectiveness of the questionnaire. The Cronbach's α coefficients of the Cultural Identity Questionnaire and the Learning Motivation Questionnaire are 0.792 and 0.763, both higher than 0.7. The reliability of the questionnaire is good.

4. Results and discussion analysis

4.1. Survey results on students' cultural identity and learning motivation

After completing the data sorting and proposing invalid content, this study uses the mean to compare the cultural identity status of sophomore and junior students, as shown in **Figure 1**.

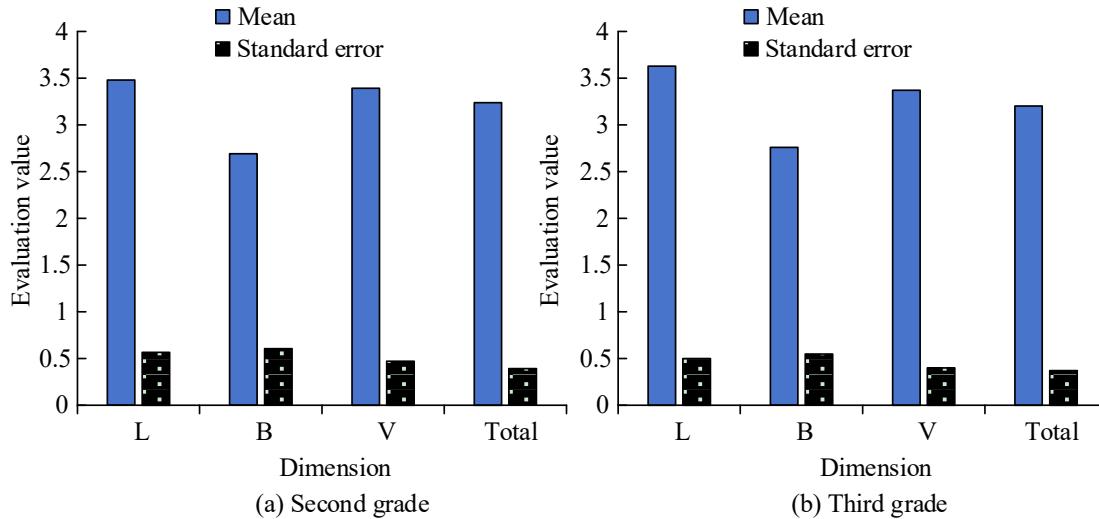


Figure 1. Current status of English and American cultural identity among EMI teaching students.

In **Figure 1(a)**, the average evaluations of sophomore's language identity, cultural identity, and value identity are 3.48, 2.69, and 3.39, and the final overall average evaluation is 3.237. In **Figure 1(b)**, the average evaluations of junior's three identities are 3.63, 2.76, and 3.37, and the overall average evaluation is 3.202. This shows that the cultural identity evaluation of most students is in the general and comparative identification stages, and the cultural identity levels between sophomore and junior are similar. Afterwards, this study compares the language learning motivations of sophomore and junior, as shown in **Figure 2**.

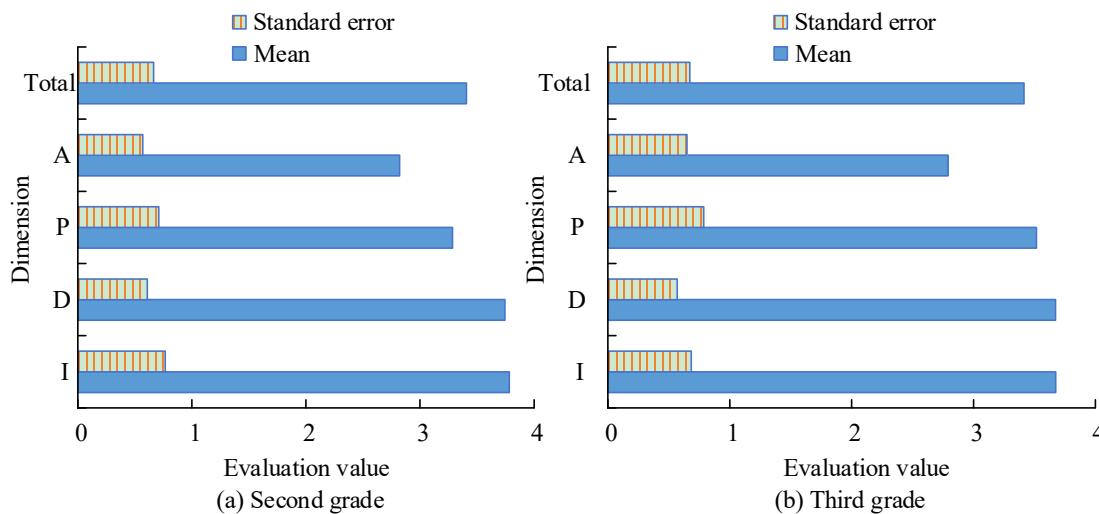


Figure 2. Current situation of students' language learning motivation under EMI teaching.

In **Figure 2(a)**, under the EMI teaching model, sophomore's evaluations of interest motivation, personal development motivation, media demand motivation, and overseas motivation are 3.78, 3.74, 3.28, and 2.82, and the overall average evaluation is 3.408. In **Figure 2(b)**, under the EMI teaching mode, junior's four

evaluation values are 3.68, 3.67, 3.52, and 3.79, and the overall average evaluation is 3.414. Similarly, students' learning motivation under the EMI teaching model is at medium intensity. From the results, it can be inferred that with the deepening of EMI teaching, there is a slight decline in intrinsic interest among college students, while their instrumental learning motivation is significantly strengthened, especially their motivation to go abroad and media demand motivation. Therefore, in EMI teaching practice, it is necessary to maintain students' intrinsic interest by enhancing their learning experience. Specifically, in the course, simulate international conferences, theatrical performances, debates, and other scenarios, inviting students to immerse themselves in roles and use language to practice cultural behaviors.

This study uses the independent sample T test method to explore the impact of different grades on college students' language identity, cultural identity, and learning motivation, as shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Independent sample t-test results of cultural identity and learning motivation among students of different grades.

Learning Motivation Questionnaire (M)				Cultural Identity Questionnaire (C)			
Dimension	Condition	Significance	Significance (bilateral)	Dimension	Condition	Significance	Significance (bilateral)
I	Assuming equal variances	0.058	0.157	L	Assuming equal variances	0.399	0.007
	Assuming unequal variances	/	0.156		Assuming unequal variances	/	0.007
D	Assuming equal variances	0.099	0.612	B	Assuming equal variances	0.068	0.257
	Assuming unequal variances	/	0.613		Assuming unequal variances	/	0.256
P	Assuming equal variances	0.235	0.323	/			
	Assuming unequal variances	/	0.323				
A	Assuming equal variances	0.034	0.003	/			
	Assuming unequal variances	/	0.003				

In **Table 2**, there is no significant difference between different grade students in the sub-dimension interest motivation of the learning motivation questionnaire ($p=0.058$). In terms of individual development motivation, the significance of the difference between sociomore and junior is 0.612, which is greater than 0.05. Therefore, there is no grade difference in individual development motivation of EMI learning. In terms of media information needs, there is also no grade difference between sophomores and juniors ($p=0.323$). In EMI teaching, grade differences only affect students' motivation to go abroad. In the dimension of motivation to go abroad, the two-sided sig value is $p=0.003$. In the sub-dimension language identity of the cultural identity questionnaire, the significance between grade differences is 0.399, and the two-sided significance is 0.007. Finally, there is no significant difference in cultural behavioral identity between students of different grades ($p=0.068$). Experiments show that students' grade differences have a relatively

small impact on their learning motivation between EMI teaching, and there is a significant difference in only one sub-dimension. On the cultural identity questionnaire, there is no significant difference in cultural behavioral identity between sophomore and junior. It can be inferred that during the deepening process of EMI education, students' behavioral identification with English culture stagnates. The results indicate that relying solely on language and knowledge transmission in the classroom cannot effectively guide students from conceptual identification to behavioral identification. Therefore, in teaching practice, it is necessary to build a closed loop from cognitive acceptance to behavioral practice, design cultural practices or international interactive projects, require students to experience cultural activities and complete report writing, in order to strengthen students' cultural behavioral cognition.

4.2. Multiple regression analysis of the impact of students' cultural identity on learning motivation

Finally, to explore the specific influencing factors and influencing mechanisms of students' English learning motivation under the EMI teaching model, this study uses multiple regression analysis methods to conduct experiments. The experiment screens the factors that affect students' learning motivation among the three variables of cultural identity: language identity, behavioral identity, and value identity, as shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. The multiple regression results of the influence of cultural identity on learning motivation.

Project		Coefficient		Significance	
Constant		1.253			<0.001
Cultural identity		0.670			<0.001
Dimension	Project	I	D	P	A
	Constant	1.325	1.101	2.268	1.139
L	β	0.176**	0.546**	0.391**	0.295**
B	β	0.542**	0.12**	/	0.227**
V	β	/	0.205**	/	/

Note: ** indicates $p<0.01$.

In **Table 3**, under the EMI learning model, the standardized coefficient of the impact of cultural identity on learning motivation is 0.670, $p=0.001$, indicating that British and American cultural identity has a significant positive impact on English learning motivation. In the dimension of interest motivation, both language identity and cultural behavior identity have a positive impact on intrinsic interest motivation, with impact coefficients of 0.176 and 0.542, $p<0.01$, while value identity has no significant impact on interest motivation ($p>0.05$). In the dimension of personal development motivation, language identification, behavioral identification and value identification all have a positive impact, with impact coefficients of 0.546, 0.12 and 0.205, $p<0.01$. In terms of media demand motivation, only language identification has a significant positive impact on it, with an impact coefficient of 0.391, $p<0.01$. In terms of motivation to go abroad, both language identity and behavioral identity have a positive impact, with impact coefficients of 0.295 and 0.227, $p<0.01$. This shows that in the EMI learning process, students' identification with the English language can best promote the development of students' learning motivation. The second is students' behavioral identification, which has the most significant positive impact on students' interest in learning. It can be inferred that the understanding and acceptance of English cultural values are more related to students' perception of English as a deep instrumental motivation to enhance their core competitiveness and achieve long-term development, rather than directly stimulating short-term interests or willingness to go abroad. Comparing Gardner's theory, it can be seen that in EMI teaching practice, cultural identity at the behavioral

level of students is more important than expected in stimulating interest, while the influence of cultural identity at the value level is more implicit and profound, mainly related to long-term development.

4.3. Teaching inspiration

Although students' learning motivation is in a relatively good state in the current EMI teaching in colleges and universities, there are large differences in students' behavior and value recognition of English language. This shows that the current cultural teaching practice in EMI English teaching may have fragmentation and superficial flaws. Based on this, EMI teaching needs to actively create real scenes of multicultural integration on campus. For example, students can be supported to independently organize activities with the theme of contrasting Chinese and Western cultures, such as bilingual drama performances, cultural salons, festival experiences, etc., to guide students to intuitively feel cultural differences and commonalities during participation, gradually form an open and prudent cultural attitude, and achieve a deepening from cognition to understanding. At the same time, classroom teaching needs to move beyond the one-way transmission of cultural knowledge to cultural comparison and exploration with students as the main body. Teachers can design structured discussions to guide students to compare and reflect on specific cultural issues, and improve cross-cultural analysis skills and language usage during interactions. Identity theory believes that individual identity changes, and the factors that cause identity changes are mainly situational. Changes in teaching situations can cause conflicts between identity standards and situational identity meanings. In the entire process of EMI teaching, especially in the selection of teaching materials and classroom design, situational factors that affect changes in students' identity should be fully considered, and a teaching situation oriented toward cultural identity should be created. It should also consciously cultivate students' ability to independently explore culture, guide them to use appropriate methods to deeply understand the values and thinking patterns behind culture, and gradually establish an objective and comprehensive view of culture. In addition, language learning needs to take into account the dual motivations of intrinsic interest and personal development. Teachers can naturally integrate cultural content into teaching, rely on real corpus, multimedia resources, etc. to present a vivid aspect of culture, stimulating and maintaining students' interest in learning. At the same time, the motivational characteristics of different grade students can be combined. For example, senior students pay more attention to the practicality and instrumental value of language, so as to design learning tasks that interweave language and culture, so that students can deepen their cultural understanding in language use and achieve a positive interaction between cultural identity and learning motivation.

5. Conclusion

Through empirical investigation, this study explored the basic characteristics and intrinsic connections between the cultural identity and learning motivation of English major students in EMI teaching. The experiment showed that the influence coefficient of cultural identity on learning motivation was 0.670, $p=0.001$. In the dimension of personal development motivation, language identity, behavioral identity, and value identity all had significant positive effects, with impact coefficients of 0.546, 0.12, and 0.205, $p<0.01$. In the practice of EMI teaching in colleges and universities, students' identification with English language culture and foreign behavioral culture could significantly promote the development of students' learning motivation. Among them, language identity had the most prominent impact on students' personal development motivation in EMI teaching, while cultural behavioral identity was more effective in stimulating intrinsic interest. Therefore, in EMI teaching, it should pay attention to the construction and guidance of cultural identity, create real cross-cultural experiences, promote cultural comparison and exploration in the classroom, and organically combine instrumental and integrative motivations to effectively

improve students' learning investment and overall teaching effect. A limitation of the study is that the survey respondents only selected students in a single area. Therefore, future research can further expand the sample scope, focus on long-term changes, and deeply explore the differential impact of cultural identity in EMI classrooms.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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