Teaching Chinese Intangible Heritage in English-- An Interdisciplinary Pedagogical Design for Paper-cutting at Primary and Secondary Levels

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Abstract

Background and Aim: In 2022, the Ministry of Education of China revised the guidelines for its 9-year compulsory education, and comprehensive social practice training, such as paper-cutting, cooking, and housekeeping, was integrated into the curriculum for primary and secondary schools. Comprehensive practice schools were established in each district to make full use of the potential resources to realize this educational objective. This study reports a novel approach in the emerging area of teaching paper-cutting to Chinese kids through English.

Materials and Methods: This study reported a preliminary attempt to teach students the intangible cultural heritage – Chinese paper-cutting through English. 20 students recommended by the students from 12 classes received the semi-structured interview.

Results: The result of the interview showcased the increase in students' awareness of cultural learning and English use, and their motivation to get involved in the creative process of producing works. It also suggests a new challenge to enhance the training outcome by implementing the training program with more interactions and presentation chances.

Conclusion: This pioneering interdisciplinary approach lays a foundation for future curriculum innovation, contributes new insights to this issue, and combines language learning with cultural preservation. Elaborate research is needed on how to get the class better organized with more efficiency.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary Training, Comprehensive Social Skill Training, Pedagogical Design, Intangible Heritage Teaching, Labor Training

Introduction

In 2022, the Ministry of Education (MOE) of China revised the guidelines for school education and officially included comprehensive social practice training into the curriculum for primary and secondary schools across the country to develop the various life skills of the students (MOE, 2022). Such comprehensive training ranges from household chores to on-campus practice and community volunteer services. It is listed as a compulsory course for all students at various levels.

Many Chinese children grow up in highly structured environments, often with limited exposure to practical tasks both at home and at school. This makes the children think that household chores end up at the bottom of their to-do lists (Fang, 2013). The change of the school curriculum this time hopefully makes the children aware of the importance of practical skills and work, which should start from an early age, the better (Lythcott-Haims, 2016).

To fulfill this educational goal, Comprehensive Practice Schools were established in each district in the city of Harbin, China. Teachers received special training in paper-cutting, cloth and art, embroidery, woodworking, cooking, housekeeping, etc., and all the primary and secondary school students go to the school for classes every month. The establishment of such schools makes full use of the potential resources for teaching and realizing educational objectives through the consolidation of the advantages and strengths of teachers in the area.

This paper focuses on the attempt to teach students paper cutting through the use of English. Paper cutting is a traditional art form with deep cultural roots in China. It was recognized as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2009 (UNESCO, 2009). Paper-cutting involves the creation of artworks using scissors or knives on paper, which present intricate designs and depict cultural symbols, traditional motifs, nature, folklore and historical narratives (Wang, 2019). Interdisciplinary

learning not only enhances students' understanding and appreciation of intangible cultural heritage but also increases their interest in English learning and improves students' cognitive abilities in both.

Although many countries have organized courses to teach intangible cultural heritages in English (Dündar and Sümbül, 2024), it is a completely new attempt in the case of primary schools in China. Due to the limited English proficiency of the students, pedagogical design is of crucial importance to present an effective and productive teaching and learning process to the children. Systematic choices and use of prescriptions, detailed operation procedures, technological methods, and devices facilitate the communication among teachers and students in class and lead students to a fruitful understanding through the realization of more productive visualization activities (Lowyck, 2002).

This study reports this preliminary attempt to teach primary and secondary school students the intangible cultural heritage – Chinese traditional paper-cutting through English. The result of the interview with 20 students showcases the increase in students' awareness of both intangible cultural learning and English use. The interview also indicates a rise in their motivation to get involved in the creative process of producing works. The research also suggests the need for a new challenge to widen the students' knowledge scope and further develop their comprehensive social skills by implementing the training program with more interactions and presentation chances.

Literature review

Intangible cultural heritages are the precious accumulations of cultural practices and changes in human societies, which are passed on from generation to generation. In many countries, preservation work has been shaped to protect these heritages from being destroyed and disappearing. Researchers agree that education serves as the primary means to the protection and sustainable preservation of cultural heritages (López-Fernández, 2021; Ocal, 2016). The core of such an educational curriculum is to cultivate an awareness and a sense of respect for cultural heritages, and this should be done from primary school (Barghi et al., 2016). Technology has been widely used for the pedagogical planning for teaching intangible cultural heritages (Dagnino et al., 2016). Web-based tools are established to support collaborative learning and have been proven to be effective in the teaching of such courses (Ott et al., 2015). In sum, educational interventions are indispensable in fostering the preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritages.

Interdisciplinary learning refers to the application of multiple approaches to learning in different subject areas. The cohesive learning experience visualizes the connections between these subject areas (Learning Corner, 2025). Many cases have been reported about the interdisciplinary approach being applied to teaching students at the primary and secondary school levels. Sonja et al. (2010) recommend the integration of small group learning in interdisciplinary education for Grades 1-9 to promote students' problem-solving abilities. Csorba (2013) reported a training program in primary education in Romania and emphasized the point that learning and vocational development through an interdisciplinary approach are both beneficial for kids. Anagnostou et al. (2022) proposed a teaching scenario for a game-based learning process through interdisciplinary approaches to inspire the motivation of the students and enhance their expertise in three different fields. The interdisciplinary approach has been proven to be effective, efficient, and productive at the primary and secondary levels. Students widen their knowledge scope in different subject areas, though the practices are still to be explored. Some questions remain regarding the educational scheme at the planning stage and the outcome of interdisciplinary approaches. Efforts are needed to demonstrate more sample classes on how to apply interdisciplinary approaches to facilitate formal class teaching.

Before 2022, paper–cutting had never been integrated into any formal school education in China. It is one of the most popular folk arts in China, and this traditional skill and technique were taught through informal teaching as a hobby, usually from older generations to the younger within a family or neighborhood (University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2025). It is still the tradition for Harbin to put on some paper-cutting works on windows and walls as decorations for holidays and celebration occasions. With the development of mechanical and information technology, large-scale quantitative production of paper-cutting works has been realized. People rely on system automation for paper-cutting work because it offers speedy production and precision. Certainly, such works produced in quantity lack

elaborate changes and individuality in images and appearance. The Chinese government realized the importance of protecting this specific craft and preventing it from vanishing. Through establishing a formal teaching curriculum for paper-cutting, it is hoped that students will gain a cultural consciousness, develop an awareness and understanding of intangible cultural heritages, and promote their original shape and inclusivity. This educational program also aims to help more students become interested in the field, which may lead them to become professional craftsmen in the future.

In this article, we would like to use the points of view of Sonja et al. (2010) to evaluate the educational outcome through interdisciplinary teaching: 1) Can the students develop an understanding of what they are studying? 2) Do they undergo integrative educational work and develop their ability in problem-solving ability? In all, what improvement can be made to enhance the teaching effect of the course?

Pedagogical Design

Pedagogical design is a significant process for realizing an effective and productive interdisciplinary approach to course training. Since the normal curricula in China's primary and secondary education pay excessive attention to knowledge input, students are not given sufficient opportunity to develop their practical skills and promote their creativity and inspiration through the output of paper-cutting works.

Figure 1. Schedule of the Class

Figure 2. Tools for the Class

Before the paper-cutting course teaching and training, teachers should get prepared with the training materials, such as colorful papers and scissors/engraving knives, and the slides using

PowerPoint to help students understand what to do (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). They are indispensable for the completing paper-cutting works but many children may not be familiar with.

Pictures of paper-cutting works are presented to students and help them obtain an intuitive understanding of paper-cutting. Instructional videos, both in English and Chinese, are used to introduce the history of this traditional cultural skill and explain the creation process of the artworks. The videos help the students to understand the connotation of the images they produce, and the knowledge on how to appreciate the works from an aesthetic perspective. More practical instructions are given to kids rather than theoretical ones, which is based on the observation of teachers not to let them lose interest in the talk.

Typical Example of a Training Scheme

Here is an example of a detailed pedagogical plan for a paper-cutting class:

① Warm-up: Show some beautiful paper-cut works to arouse their interest in paper-cutting and get them motivated to accomplish the task of the day. Show some English keywords and expressions that will be used in class later.

② Presentation: Explain the history of paper-cutting in both English and highlight the point that it is part of the intangible cultural heritage of China. Help the students get familiar with the tools required for the course training.

③ Demonstration: To help the students understand the techniques they have to use, show them a short instructional video in English demonstrating the steps they should take to create a simple paper-cutting work, such as a flower or a heart. Those are the basic and easy parts that frequently appear in paper-cutting works and could be combined to form a relatively complex piece of work.

④ Practice: It is time for the students to practice paper cutting step by step, under the teacher's guidance. Encourage the students to communicate in English as much as possible, sharing their ideas and comments. It doesn't matter that sometimes they might be able to produce straightforward terms.

⑤ Show and Share: Ask students to show their finished paper-cuts and briefly describe in English what they have made and how they feel about the activity.

⑥ Conclusion: Summarize the key points of the lesson. Comment on students' efforts and achievements. Encourage them to explore intangible cultural heritage more.

⑦ Homework: Design a paper-cut work on a theme they are familiar with. Write a short English description of it.

This curriculum design integrates the traditional art of paper cutting with English language learning, allowing students to have a hands-on experience while improving their language skills and cultural awareness. Teachers must pay attention to students' performance in paper cutting and English learning, especially in the former. Since most students do not have experience in paper cutting, they are instructed to work on some simple shapes and patterns at the early stage of the training (Fig. 3). These figures contain cultural implications and are used to refer to happiness and prosperity in most cases. Simple figures are combined and integrated to form an intricate image or picture.

Figure 3. Examples of students' work

Scenarios for Using Scissors and Engraving Knives

Patience is needed for paper cutting using scissors or engraving knives. It is another factor that affects the quality of the work in addition to skills and creativity. The more patience, the more exquisite works could be created. This is especially important in the case of engraving knives, because scissors are usually used to cut the rough line of the work, while engraving knives are indispensable for detailed and delicate expressions. General scenarios are different for scissors and engraving knives as follows:

*Scissors paper-cutting process:

① Prepare tools and materials, including scissors, paper (which can be colored paper, rice paper, etc.), pencils, and erasers.

② Design the patterns. Lightly sketch the desired pattern on the paper with a pencil. It can be simple geometric shapes, images of animals and plants, or complex scenes.

③ Fix the paper: If the paper is small, gently hold it with one hand to keep it stable. For more extensive papers, use heavy objects to press them down or stick them on a flat surface.

④ Start paper-cutting: Start from the edge of the pattern and use scissors to cut along the pencil lines. Pay attention to the opening and closing range of the scissors and try to keep the lines smooth and neat. For the internal detail parts, carefully rotate the paper for easier cutting.

⑤Finally complete: Following the outline of the pattern, cut all the parts one by one. Be patient and meticulous during the paper-cutting process to avoid cutting the wrong places.

⑥ Tidy up and modify: After cutting, gently remove the pencil marks and debris from the paper-cutting. Check for any areas that need further trimming and make appropriate modifications.

*Engraving knife, paper-cutting process:

① Prepare tools and materials: Besides paper and pencils, prepare engraving knives, engraving boards (such as rubber boards or unique paper-cutting engraving boards), and backing boards.

② Draw the pattern: Just like scissors, paper-cutting, draw the pattern to be engraved on the paper. However, due to the characteristics of the engraving knife, the pattern can be more complex and finer.

③ Fix the paper: Place the paper with the drawn pattern on the engraving board and fix it with clips or tape to ensure it does not move.

④ Engrave the pattern: Use the engraving knife to engrave along the pattern lines. The engraving knife is generally perpendicular to the paper. Gently push the engraving knife to engrave the lines. You can engrave multiple times for thinner lines or complex parts to achieve the desired effect.

⑤ Deal with internal details: To hollow out or engrave small areas or detail parts inside the pattern, you can use the methods of etching or sanding.

⑥ Completion and tidying up: After engraving the entire pattern, carefully remove the paper and clean up the engraved paper scraps. Check for any omissions or areas that need trimming.

Assessment

To offer a fair evaluation to each student, both formative and summative assessments are applied to the final evaluation.

① Formative Assessment is carried out with teachers offering feedback to each student based on their observations of their efforts to complete the work and engage in conversation with other students during the creation process.

② Summative Assessment refers to evaluating the finished works based on creativity, technical skill, and cultural relevance and representation. Students must submit a brief report in English about what they learned in class and what they think about paper cutting.

Results

Research has shown that engaging in arts and crafts activities, such as paper cutting, can improve fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination, and spatial awareness (Smith, 2018). Additionally, paper-cutting encourages creativity, problem-solving, and patience, making it a valuable addition to the school curriculum (Johnson & Lee, 2020).

To examine the fruitfulness of the course, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 students from primary schools to learn about their true feelings. Due to the improvement in English language proficiency and their practical skills, students at secondary levels could do a much better job in class than those at primary schools. Thus, the authors believe that interviews should be conducted with primary school students, especially lower grades, since they are incompetent in both English and practical skills. The interview was conducted in the autumn term of 2024, from November to the end of December.

Table 1. Demography of Interviewees

Age	Grade	Number
7	1st	4
8	2nd	4
9	3rd	4
10	4th	3
11	5th	3
12	6th	2

The demographic information of the interviewees is listed in Table 1. These interviewees were recommended by the students in 12 classes, with 2 classes in each grade. They are the students with either the highest assessment score or the lowest in the class. The authors were afraid that the kids might not be able to tell the truth if they were too nervous. One of the authors just had conversations with the kids while integrating formal questions into the casual talks. The interviewees were asked to make

comments on the course. They could talk about both the advantages and the disadvantages. They were required to make suggestions on the improvements that enable them to make better production out of the learning process. They were also encouraged to offer information about their learning at home and whether they will continue practicing once the training course is over, and so on.

On the whole, students showed strong interest in the training course and were satisfied with their progress in cutting skills, cultural awareness, communication abilities, and English language use. All of the interviewees realized their responsibility to learn about Chinese intangible heritage and pass on the skill. 18 out of the 20 students enjoyed the cutting activity, and 2 students complained about the detailed work that made them frustrated. 17 students indicated an increase in their English vocabulary and expressions, and 11 students mentioned that they were happy working with other kids. Here are some quotes from the interview:

"*I don't want to work on the details. It is just boring. I prefer to run on the playground.*"

"*My mother never allows me to touch scissors at home. But now I can create my works. I brought back my work and showed it to my mother.*"

"*I talked with that boy in my group for the first time, and we became friends.*"

"*I am very proud of the paper-cutting skills we have in our hometown. I hope more people can know about it and enjoy our works.*"

"*My parents don't know anything about English. They can't help me with the homework. I feel frustrated.*"

"*I can't catch up with the teacher and other kids. I feel lonely because they don't talk to me.*"

"*My parents always ask me to remember the new words by heart, but I never had a chance to use them before. I heard several words I learnt by myself in the video.*"

"*I want to do the work as well as Lingxu Li. She is so skillful.*"

"*I will practice this during the winter vacation. It is so interesting. I will create images of a great variety of things.*"

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Positive findings were available on the following practice in class:

*Teachers demonstrate the cutting techniques step-by-step, allowing students to have a close observation and imitation.

*Bilingual teaching materials, such as videos and slides on instructions, are very beneficial. Students gain a better understanding of what they are supposed to do.

*Scaffolding learning strategies are used to provide segmental instructions to students. Teachers offer templates and detailed guidance to beginners and gradually reduce support and assistance as they grasp the cutting skills and gain confidence.

*Collaborative learning is strongly encouraged. Students work in teams and exchange ideas on how to improve their skills with peers. They become more motivated when they collaborate to complete a complex piece of work through advanced techniques, such as layered cutting and three-dimensional designs. They are also encouraged to create original works inspired by the contemporary themes they share.

*Self and Peer Assessment: Encourage students to reflect on their creation process and offer constructive feedback to peers as well.

*Through integration with English learning, students made progress in their linguistic skills and enlarged their English vocabulary and expressions. They also enriched their knowledge in the historical and cultural contexts of paper cutting.

Meanwhile, teachers face some challenges to get better results out of the training process:

*Due to the gap in students' English proficiency, some of them were not able to produce a summary or a report to explain their work. Some students prefer to communicate with the teacher and their peers through Chinese explanations. Helping them get accustomed to English contexts is challenging.

*Some students didn't even have much experience using scissors or engraving knives. It took them a longer time to accomplish the paper-cutting work. How to cheer them up and help them foster a sense of accomplishment is a crucial task.

*Some students are reluctant to get involved in conversations and activities with peers in their teams.

*Some students show strong skills in creation and are anxious to proceed to the next step. Assistants with professional instructional experience are needed to meet these students' individual needs.

Discussion

This research shows how teaching Chinese paper-cutting through English represents innovative cultural responsiveness for primary and secondary education. This educational model merges traditional craftsmanship with language instruction to support both cultural preservation and language learning outcomes. The authors' perspective on this educational approach matches the viewpoint presented by López-Fernández et al. According to López-Fernández et al. (2021), education serves as a vital mechanism for preserving intangible cultural heritage. The current curriculum addresses the Chinese education system's neglect of practical skills by linking cognitive abilities with real-world experience and adheres to the Ministry of Education's 2022 requirement for social practice integration in compulsory education.

Interdisciplinary pedagogical design has shown strong results in increasing both student engagement and motivation levels. Students demonstrated enhanced English proficiency and simultaneously cultivated their creativity and collaborative skills while becoming more culturally aware. The results align with Sonja et al.'s (2010) research findings. The study by Sonja et al. (2010) demonstrates that primary education benefits from interdisciplinary teaching by improving problem-solving capabilities and integrative thinking. The course design combines multimedia materials with hands-on practice and group interaction to implement Lowyck's (2002) pedagogical approach, which emphasizes systematic tool usage and procedures to improve learning results.

Interviews with students revealed meaningful data about learner responses to this modern training method. Students showed great excitement about their cultural heritage, but faced difficulties with varying English skills and limited technical abilities. Students experienced intimidation from tools like scissors or engraving knives, which demonstrated the necessity of scaffolding and differentiated instruction. These findings align with Anagnostou et al. The 2022 research by Anagnostou and colleagues underscores the need to develop activities that meet diverse learning capabilities to maintain student involvement and ensure inclusive education. This educational model demonstrates how student-led reflection combined with peer feedback enhances metacognitive abilities and supports self-directed learning.

Teachers encountered difficulties while trying to deliver the course successfully. The need to balance content delivery with language support demanded both creative thinking and flexible approaches. As Ott et al. According to Ott et al. (2015), educators require both collaborative planning and adaptive instruction to successfully integrate cultural heritage into formal education programs. Students demonstrated greater eagerness to participate when they had opportunities to express ideas through visual art creation and verbal English communication, and social teamwork activities. Interdisciplinary learning achieves academic goals while simultaneously developing learners' socio-emotional skills and civic awareness.

The pedagogical model represents a valuable path forward in developing future educational curricula. This educational approach supports worldwide initiatives to protect intangible cultural heritage as defined by UNESCO in 2009 while promoting students' comprehensive growth. Upcoming research needs to examine long-term effects and determine how such training shapes individuals' career goals and their cultural identities. Other nations can use this integrated approach as a guide to maintain cultural heritage while developing modern skills in students.

Conclusions

This study examines an initial attempt in China to integrate paper-cutting training into English teaching for primary students. The results show that students are very motivated to get involved in this new style of training. Due to the insufficient skills among students in the English language, paper-cutting, or both, teachers have to make efforts in class to keep the balance between the required training and the needs of the students. It may still take some time for the teachers to work out more effective and efficient pedagogical plans. They should not only optimize the teaching plans but also provide flexible learning opportunities for students. More dynamic and innovative courses are to be created to promote the engagement of students with a diverse range of aptitudes. It would be an excellent incentive for students if their work could be displayed at local and national galleries or even abroad.

New research directions should focus on how to employ paper-cutting as a tool to enhance students' English language learning to the maximum. Classroom experiments should be carried out to analyze students' needs at each level and provide them with appropriate training content and activities accordingly. Since this is only the beginning of this curriculum change, more practical studies are expected to discuss the pedagogical renovation in detail and improve the efficiency of this training program. More possibilities are to be explored through longitudinal studies as to how this training helps students help students in their future job-seeking, how they could realize their dreams in the future if they are willing to be professional craftsmen, and how this program contributes to the long-term sustainable development of the country.

Knowledge Contribution

The analysis of results enables us to synthesize new concepts. The new concepts demonstrate fresh approaches for curriculum design and teaching methods that support student growth.

1. Interdisciplinary Cultural-Linguistic Engagement

The study presents interdisciplinary cultural-linguistic engagement as a fundamental concept that enables students to gain knowledge about cultural heritage like Chinese paper-cutting while concurrently enhancing their English language skills through integrated teaching methods. Students experience enhanced learning outcomes and stronger motivation because connecting language education to cultural identity gives their learning a valuable purpose and significance.

2. Culturally Anchored Creative Expression

Through traditional art forms, students expressed themselves, leading to a combination that constitutes culturally rooted creative expression. Their artistic creations displayed inherited themes alongside individual choices that illustrated the role of cultural education in nurturing creative development and cultural preservation. The integration of practical activities with verbal storytelling about art allows students to develop their emotional understanding while simultaneously enhancing their language skills and aesthetic appreciation.

3. Collaborative Multimodal Learning

Collaborative multimodal learning represents an emerging educational approach that requires students to engage in learning activities through the use of visual aids, language exercises, and social collaboration. The paper-cutting activity with teamwork alongside peer discussions and presentations contributed to developing social connections and communication abilities. This educational approach teaches through different intelligences while providing tailored instruction to meet the needs of students with various learning styles.

4. Scaffolded Skill Empowerment

The educational method moved students through scaffolded learning stages, starting with basic actions until they reached paper-cutting and English language mastery. Students who had limited previous experience were able to build confidence in tool usage and language practice through this approach while learning to reflect on their work. Both formative and summative assessments strengthened the student's steady development and independent learning progress.

5. Emotional-Aesthetic Learning Activation

The course initiated emotional-aesthetic learning when affective responses, including pride and frustration, served as the main engagement drivers. Through their emotional responses to their art

projects and peer evaluations alongside historical paper-cutting stories, students show how arts-integrated learning enhances internal motivation and personal identity growth.
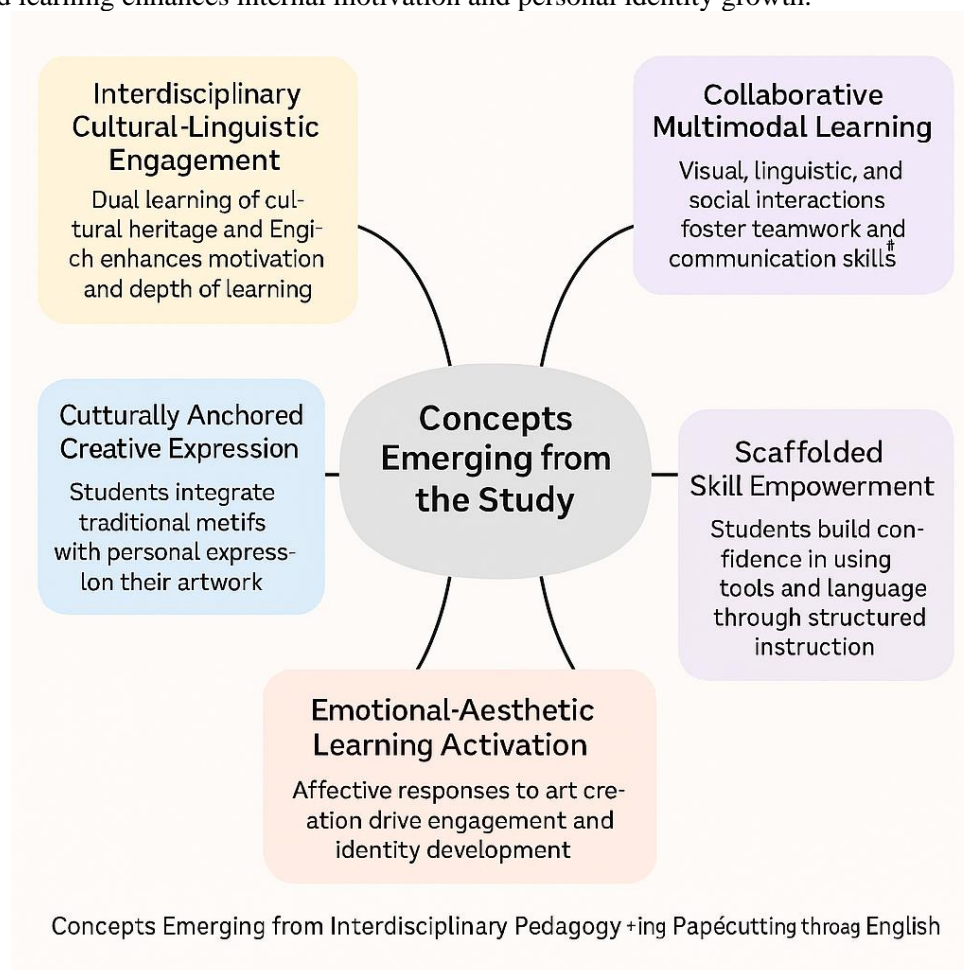

Figure 4: Knowledge Contribution

Recommendation

1. Policy Recommendation

Educational policymakers should institutionalize interdisciplinary cultural education within the national curriculum by formally recognizing arts-integrated, language-supported programs as part of core learning. The Ministry of Education can provide flexible curriculum guidelines that embed intangible cultural heritage (ICH) learning in language, arts, and civic education subjects. Incentivizing schools through funding, teacher training, and resource allocation will ensure sustainability and scalability.

2. Pedagogical Practices Recommendation

Schools and educators are encouraged to adopt culturally responsive interdisciplinary teaching by:

• Using bilingual materials and multimedia resources to support diverse learners.

• Applying scaffolded instruction with gradual release strategies to build both language and craft skills.

• Promoting collaborative learning structures such as peer tutoring, group projects, and creative exhibitions.

• Ensuring inclusive participation by offering differentiated tasks and mentorship for students with varying skill levels.

3. Further Research Recommendation

Future research should conduct longitudinal studies to examine the impact of such interdisciplinary programs on students':
- Cultural identity formation
- English language proficiency
- Creative thinking and socio-emotional skills

Researchers should also investigate how these programs influence career aspirations, particularly in creative industries and heritage conservation. Comparative studies across regions or countries could help understand contextual adaptability and best practices.

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