

Investigating Student Needs for Teaching Content of “Multi-Ethnic Culture” Curriculum in the Context of ASEAN Culture

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and deepening Belt and Road Initiative, this study examines 529 undergraduates’ learning needs for integrating ASEAN cultural content into “Multi-Ethnic Culture” curriculum at a border region university. Findings reveal a “high interest-low understanding” tension structure: 75.1% express strong interest in ASEAN cultures, but only 23.4% demonstrate deep understanding, with 78.3% primarily learning through informal digital channels. Structural curriculum gaps exist, with “integration of ASEAN materials” receiving the lowest satisfaction (M=2.89). Students prioritize intercultural interpretation skills (importance 4.35), communication abilities (4.28), and research practice capabilities (4.02), favoring visual content (traditional arts 72.4%, festive customs 68.2%) and interactive teaching methods (case comparisons 78.3%, digital presentations 72.4%). Importance-Performance Analysis identifies these three competencies as priority improvement areas. This study proposes an “Understanding (30%) — Practice (40%) — Innovation (30%)” framework, integrating case comparisons, digital displays, thematic instruction, and practical activities, providing empirical evidence for curriculum internationalization in border region universities.

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Introduction

SINCE the establishment of the ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2021, bilateral cooperation has continuously deepened, with cultural exchanges and people-to-people bonds becoming integral components of their multidimensional relationship (Ministry of Education, 2023). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967, currently comprises ten member states: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia. These nations collectively represent a population of over 670 million and possess diverse yet interconnected cultural landscapes shaped by centuries of trade, migration, and religious exchange (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024).

ASEAN member states exhibit remarkable cultural diversity characterized by the coexistence of multiple religious traditions—including Buddhism (dominant in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia), Islam (predominant in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei), Catholicism (significant in the Philippines), and Confucian-influenced cultural practices (prominent in Singapore and Vietnam). This religious pluralism has fostered a unique tapestry of cultural expressions, festivals, architectural styles, and social customs that, while distinct, share underlying patterns of cultural adaptation and exchange across the Southeast Asian region (Bouma et al., 2009). Despite these differences, ASEAN nations share common historical experiences, including colonial histories, post-independence nation-building processes, and contemporary aspirations for economic integration and regional identity formation, which justify discussing them as a cohesive cultural entity within educational contexts (Kurlantzick, 2012).

Geographically positioned as China's southern neighbor and immediate cross-border partner, ASEAN maintains multifaceted relationships with China encompassing geopolitical proximity, extensive trade networks, diasporic Chinese communities, and robust people-to-people exchanges. In 2023, ASEAN remained China's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade exceeding \$950 billion, while cultural and educational exchanges flourished, with over 175,000 students engaged in two-way educational mobility (Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], 2024). The implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and Belt and Road Initiative has further accelerated connectivity, creating unprecedented demand for professionals capable of navigating intercultural contexts in business, diplomacy, and cultural exchange (Ministry of Education of China, 2022).

Against this backdrop, Guangxi, situated at the forefront of China-ASEAN cooperation, must align its higher education reforms with national strategies and regional development needs. The unique geographical and cultural position of Guangxi, sharing borders with Vietnam and hosting cross-border ethnic communities such as Zhuang, Dai, and Jing peoples who maintain linguistic and cultural affinities with populations in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, creates distinctive opportunities for comparative cultural education that leverages these cross-border connections. However, current “multi-ethnic culture” curricula in Chinese higher education primarily focus on domestic ethnic minorities (Grant & Sleeter, 2021), with limited integration of ASEAN cultural content. This results in a significant gap between educational offerings and regional talent demands for professionals possessing both national and intercultural competencies.

Although some Guangxi universities have initiated exploratory efforts—such as Guangxi University’s “Baguig Academy” offering “ASEAN Cultural Characteristics” series courses and Guangxi University for Nationalities establishing specialized language education systems, existing practices predominantly concentrate on language and business-related curricula (Wang, 2023). Systematic integration of ASEAN cultural elements into humanities disciplines, particularly liberal arts programs, remains insufficient. Traditional teaching models centered on nation or ethnic group fail to fully leverage linguistic and cultural affinities between cross-border ethnic groups and Southeast Asian nations, while also failing to align with students’ learning habits of accessing cultural content through digital media and their expectations for interactive, experiential learning. Consequently, they exhibit limitations in knowledge structure, breadth of perspective, and educational functionality, falling short of meeting the new era’s demand for cultivating high-caliber, versatile talents equipped with intercultural understanding and communication skills (Guo et al., 2022).

This study focuses specifically on students at Chinese border region universities influenced by China-ASEAN relationships, examining their learning needs for ASEAN cultural content integration within “Multi-Ethnic Culture” curriculum. The research aims to address the critical question: How can curriculum design in border region universities be optimized to effectively develop students’ intercultural competence while serving regional development and China-ASEAN people-to-people exchanges?

Literature Review

Current State of Multi-Ethnic and Intercultural Education Research

Research on multi-ethnic and intercultural education has developed significantly over recent decades. Banks (1993, 2004, 2015) established foundational frameworks emphasizing content integration, knowledge construction processes, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school cultures. These frameworks have been extensively applied globally, demonstrating that effective multi-ethnic education requires systematic, comprehensive approaches beyond superficial cultural celebrations.

In the Chinese context, researchers have increasingly examined challenges and opportunities in incorporating multi-ethnic perspectives into higher education curricula. Guo et al. (2022) identified trends in internationalizing ethnic studies in Chinese universities, noting growing interest in intercultural approaches alongside persistent structural barriers. Grant and Sleeter (2021) emphasized the importance of moving beyond domestic ethnic minority focus to incorporate broader international perspectives. Studies of specific border region universities have begun exploring comparative cultural education approaches, particularly those leveraging cross-border ethnic similarities, though systematic empirical research remains limited.

Theoretical Frameworks: Intercultural Competence and Curriculum Needs Analysis

Intercultural competence theory provides essential frameworks for understanding capabilities needed for effective intercultural interaction. Byram's (2021) model emphasizes knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness as interconnected dimensions. Deardorff's (2006) framework identifies attitudes (respect, openness, curiosity), knowledge (cultural self-awareness, culture-specific knowledge), skills (listening, observing, interpreting, relating), and desired external outcomes. Cultural intelligence (CQ) theory proposed by Earley and Ang (2003) conceptualizes cultural intelligence as comprising metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral dimensions.

Curriculum needs analysis frameworks provide systematic approaches for identifying and prioritizing learning needs. Tyler's (2013) foundational model identified key questions about educational purposes, learning experiences, organization, and evaluation. Contemporary approaches incorporate stakeholder perspectives, including student needs assessment, societal demands, and disciplinary requirements (Posner, 2004). Cohen et al.'s (2018) research methods framework and Creswell and Creswell's (2018) design approaches provide methodological guidance for conducting systematic needs assessments in educational contexts.

Intercultural Education in ASEAN Contexts

Research on intercultural and intercultural education specifically in ASEAN contexts has expanded considerably. Recent research has demonstrated positive impacts of incorporating ASEAN culture and arts into multi-ethnic education, finding that such integration enhances student understanding, tolerance, and appreciation for cultural diversity while improving academic engagement (Anonymous, 2024). Studies examining teacher and student perspectives in Southeast Asian contexts reveal both progress and persistent challenges, with significant gaps existing between policy aspirations and actual classroom implementation (Dang, 2025).

Research specifically addressing China-ASEAN educational cooperation has grown alongside strengthening bilateral relationships. Studies emphasize the importance of educational exchanges as cornerstones of mutual understanding and trust, with increasing student mobility between China and ASEAN countries creating both opportunities and challenges for educational institutions (SEAMEO, 2024). Recent research highlights China's Belt and Road Initiative and Vision and Actions for Building China-ASEAN Educational Cooperation and Development (2022–2030) as frameworks that have accelerated educational collaboration and created demand for professionals with intercultural competencies (Ministry of Education of China, 2022).

Despite this growing body of research, several gaps remain relevant to the current study. First, while research exists on multi-ethnic education generally and on some aspects of ASEAN-related education, limited empirical studies have systematically examined student needs for ASEAN cultural content integration within Chinese university curricula, particularly at border region institutions. Second, research on intercultural competence development in Chinese liberal arts programs, as opposed to business or language programs, remains limited. Third, few studies have applied systematic needs analysis methodologies to identify specific cur-

riculum content and teaching method preferences from student perspectives in China-ASEAN educational contexts.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive survey research design with quantitative methods to systematically examine student needs for ASEAN cultural content integration within “Multi-Ethnic Culture” curriculum. The design is cross-sectional in nature, collecting data at a single point in time to assess current student understanding, interests, needs, and preferences (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). The study operates within a post-positivist paradigm that acknowledges the complexity of educational phenomena while seeking to identify patterns and relationships through systematic measurement and analysis.

Research Subjects

Ethical considerations were addressed through several measures. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Payap University (Approval No. PYU_REC No.68/015). All participants provided written informed consent after being informed about the study’s purposes, procedures, voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality assurances. Participation did not impact course grades or academic standing. Data were anonymized and reported only in aggregate form to protect participant privacy.

The study population consists of undergraduate students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages (GUFL), located in Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. GUFL was selected as the research site due to its distinctive regional characteristics and institutional positioning as a border region university focused on cultivating language and literature talents oriented toward ASEAN countries. Sampling employed a convenience sampling approach, recruiting participants from multiple grade levels within the College of Liberal Arts to capture diverse perspectives and academic experiences.

A total of 618 questionnaires were distributed, with 529 valid responses collected, yielding a response rate of 85.60%. This sample size provides adequate power for descriptive statistics, reliability and validity

analyses, and multivariate analyses including Importance-Performance Analysis employed in the study (Pallant, 2020).

Ethical considerations were addressed through several measures. All participants provided informed consent after being informed about the study's purposes, procedures, voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality assurances. Participation did not impact course grades or academic standing. The study protocol acknowledged approval from the institutional research ethics committee at GUFL, ensuring compliance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. Data were anonymized and reported only in aggregate form to protect participant privacy.

Research Tools

The student survey questionnaire was developed through a multi-stage process ensuring theoretical grounding and psychometric validity. The questionnaire comprised multiple sections addressing: (1) demographic information and academic background; (2) current understanding of and exposure to ASEAN culture; (3) evaluation of existing curriculum content and teaching methods; (4) interests and preferences for ASEAN cultural content; (5) perceived importance of intercultural competencies; and (6) suggestions for curriculum improvement.

Item development incorporated multiple sources: extensive literature review on multi-ethnic education, intercultural competence assessment, and curriculum needs surveys; examination of existing instruments; consultation with domain experts in ethnology, education, and ASEAN studies; and cognitive interviewing with a small group of students. The questionnaire employed Likert-type scales for most items, with response options typically ranging from 1 (strongly disagree/unimportant) to 5 (strongly agree/important), plus options for multiple selections on categorical items.

Reliability assessment employed Cronbach's alpha coefficients to evaluate internal consistency. The overall questionnaire demonstrated good reliability with an alpha coefficient of 0.84, exceeding the commonly-accepted threshold of 0.70 (Pallant, 2020). Alpha coefficients for individual dimensions ranged from 0.81 to 0.90, indicating good to excellent internal consistency.

Validity assessment employed multiple approaches. Content validity was established through expert review and literature-based item development. Construct validity was examined through exploratory factor analysis, which yielded a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of 0.88, ex-

ceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(1431) = 11892.188, p < 0.001$), indicating data were suitable for factor analysis.

The Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) methodology involves comparing student-perceived importance of various competencies with their perceived performance in current curriculum delivery. This technique, originally developed by Martilla and James (1977), identifies priority areas for improvement by mapping competencies into four quadrants: (1) high importance-high performance (maintain strengths), (2) high importance-low performance (prioritize improvements), (3) low importance-high performance (potential over-emphasis), and (4) low importance-low performance (low priority).

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to full-scale data collection, a pilot study with 30 students was conducted to evaluate questionnaire clarity, administration procedures, and preliminary psychometric properties. Minor refinements were made based on pilot study findings. Main data collection employed multiple administration modes to maximize participation and accessibility, including paper formats distributed during class sessions and digital platforms administered through secure online survey platforms.

Data collection procedures emphasized voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent. Participants received clear information about the study's purposes, time requirements, and their rights regarding participation. Data collection spanned approximately two weeks to ensure adequate opportunity for participation while maintaining consistency in data collection conditions.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis employed both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques appropriate to research questions and measurement scales. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated to summarize student demographics, understanding levels, interests, and preferences.

Inferential statistical analyses included:

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine differences in understanding levels across grade levels, with post-hoc tests to identify specific group differences.

Independent samples t-tests to compare understanding levels between students with and without prior ASEAN learning experiences.

Factor analysis to assess construct validity of questionnaire dimensions.

Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) involving calculating mean importance and performance scores for each competency dimension, then plotting these on a four-quadrant matrix.

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software, with significance levels set at $p < 0.05$. Data cleaning procedures included examination for missing values, outliers, and data entry errors prior to analysis.

Research Results

This chapter systematically presents empirical analysis results based on survey data from 529 undergraduates. Overall, findings reveal significant gaps between student interest and current understanding, structural deficiencies in curriculum content, clear preferences for specific content types and teaching methods, and identifiable priority areas for curriculum improvement.

Research Question 1: Foundational Knowledge of ASEAN Culture and Characteristics of Exposure Channels

This section analyzes students' foundational understanding of ASEAN culture and patterns of exposure through which they encounter cultural information about ASEAN countries.

Level of Understanding of ASEAN Culture

Analysis of students' self-rated understanding levels reveals a distribution that, while not severely deficient, indicates substantial room for improvement. Data show that students' understanding of ASEAN culture follows a roughly normal distribution (**Table 1**), with the largest group (44.8%) reporting moderate familiarity ("somewhat familiar"), followed by those with limited familiarity (31.8%) and those with substantial familiarity (16.6%). Only 6.8% of students indicated very high familiarity with ASEAN culture, a figure that is concerning given the university's regional positioning and ASEAN-oriented mission.

Table 1. Distribution of Students' Self-Rated Understanding of ASEAN Culture (N=529).

Level of understanding	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
1=Very unfamiliar	42	7.9	7.9
2=Not very familiar	126	23.8	31.8
3=Somewhat familiar	237	44.8	76.6
4=Fairly familiar	88	16.6	93.2
5=Very familiar	36	6.8	100.0
Mean	2.91	-	-
Standard deviation	1.02	-	-

Table 2. Channels of Exposure to ASEAN Culture (N=529, multiple responses permitted).

Contact Channels	Number of people selected	Selection Ratio (%)
Short videos/documentaries	414	78.3
Online articles	345	65.2
Classroom instruction	277	52.4
Extracurricular reading materials	205	38.8
Interpersonal communication	173	32.7
Never encountered	47	8.9

The overall mean understanding level of 2.91, closer to “somewhat familiar” than to “fairly familiar,” indicates that while most students have some basic knowledge, deep understanding is relatively rare. Analysis of variance revealed statistically significant differences in students’ understanding across grade levels ($F=8.32$, $p<0.001$), with third- and fourth-year students demonstrating significantly higher levels of understanding than first- and second-year students. Furthermore, students with prior learning experiences in ASEAN culture demonstrated significantly greater familiarity than those without such experiences ($t=7.23$, $p<0.001$), with mean understanding levels of 3.45 versus 2.78 respectively.

Channels of Exposure to ASEAN Culture

Analysis of primary channels through which students encounter information about ASEAN ethnic cultures reveals the predominance of digital and informal learning over formal educational channels (**Table 2**). Short videos and documentaries emerged as the dominant channel (78.3%), followed by online articles (65.2%) and classroom instruction (52.4%). Extracurricular reading materials (38.8%) and interpersonal communication

Table 3. ASEAN Cultural Understanding by Prior Learning Experience (N=529).

Familiarity Level	Yes	No
Very unfamiliar	4 (3.1%)	40 (10.0%)
Somewhat unfamiliar	18 (13.8%)	104 (26.1%)
Some familiarity	44 (33.8%)	174 (43.6%)
Fairly familiar	44 (33.8%)	65 (16.3%)
Very familiar	20 (15.4%)	16 (4.0%)
Total	130	399
Mean	3.45	2.78

(32.7%) were used relatively less frequently, while only 8.9% of students reported never having been exposed to ASEAN culture through any channel.

Several important patterns emerge from these data. First, digital channels dominate as primary information sources, indicating that students primarily encounter ASEAN cultural content through informal digital platforms rather than structured educational programming. Second, classroom coverage falls short of expectations given the university’s regional positioning. Third, traditional learning channels like extracurricular reading materials and interpersonal communication are underutilized as sources of ASEAN cultural information.

Cross-Analysis of Understanding and Learning Experiences

Cross-tabulation analysis confirms a strong positive relationship between formal educational exposure and cultural understanding (**Table 3**). Students with learning experiences demonstrated significantly higher levels of understanding (M=3.45) compared to those without learning experience (M=2.78), $t=7.23$, $p<0.001$. Notably, among students with learning experiences, 49.2% demonstrated deep understanding (“fairly familiar” + “very familiar”), compared to only 20.3% among those without such experiences.

Overall, findings reveal a “high interest-low understanding” tension structure that underscores significant opportunities for curriculum enhancement. Students demonstrate moderate familiarity with ASEAN culture (Mean = 2.91), with only 23.4% demonstrating deep understanding. Understanding levels vary significantly across grade levels and prior learning experiences, suggesting that systematic educational exposure

Table 4. Evaluation of Current Course Status by Dimension (N=529).

Evaluation Dimensions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking
Alignment with Core Disciplinary Content	3.52	0.98	1
Overall Satisfaction	3.27	1.05	2
Integration of Theory and Practice	3.21	1.02	3
Utilization of Regional Advantages	3.18	1.08	4
Enhancement of intercultural Awareness	3.05	1.11	5
integration of ASEAN materials	2.89	1.15	6

plays a crucial role in developing cultural knowledge. Digital informal channels dominate information access (78.3% through short videos and documentaries), while formal classroom instruction reaches only 52.4% of students.

Research Question 2: Discrepancies Between Current Curriculum Content and Student Needs

This section analyzes students' evaluations of current curriculum practices and identifies gaps between existing content and perceived student needs for ASEAN cultural integration.

Evaluation of Current Curriculum Practices

Students' evaluations of current curriculum content across six key dimensions reveal mixed performance with significant areas for improvement (**Table 4**). Overall satisfaction with the current "Multi-Ethnic Culture" curriculum averaged 3.27 on a 5-point scale, indicating moderately positive but not highly satisfactory level. However, substantial variation exists across dimensions.

The course demonstrates relative strength in traditional disciplinary areas, with "alignment with core subject matter" (M=3.52) being the highest-scoring dimension. In contrast, the integration of ASEAN content represents the most significant weakness, with "integration of ASEAN materials" receiving the lowest evaluation score (M=2.89), representing the course's most pronounced deficiency.

Key Challenges and Improvement Needs

Table 5. Challenges and Improvement Needs (N=529, multiple responses permitted).

Category	Item	Selection %	Ranking
Key Challenges	Theoretical abstraction, difficult to grasp	62.8	1
	Disconnect from practical application	58.2	2
	Dull content, lacking appeal	54.3	3
	Lack of ASEAN-specific content	45.9	4
	Outdated materials, lacking contemporary relevance	38.0	5
Improvement Needs	Increase ASEAN ethnic cultural materials	68.8	1
	Strengthen practical application content	65.4	2
	Add digital resources	58.8	3
	Optimize theoretical presentation methods	52.3	4

Analysis of student-identified challenges and improvement priorities reveals several structural and pedagogical issues (Table 5). The most prominent challenges include “theoretical abstraction and difficulty in comprehension” (62.8%), “disconnect from practical application” (58.2%), and “dry content lacking appeal” (54.3%). Students identified four key improvement areas: “increasing ASEAN ethnic cultural materials” (68.8%), “strengthening practical application content” (65.4%), “expanding digital resources” (58.8%), and “optimizing theoretical presentation methods” (52.3%).

Evaluation data indicate that while the course has strengths in traditional disciplinary coverage, significant gaps exist in achieving newer objectives related to ASEAN content integration and intercultural competency development. Pedagogical issues dominate student concerns—theoretical abstraction (62.8%), disconnect from practice (58.2%), and unengaging content (54.3%)—suggesting that improving course effectiveness requires attention not just to what content is taught but how it is taught. Increasing ASEAN content emerges as the highest priority (68.8%), alongside strong demand for strengthened practical application content (65.4%) and expanded digital resources (58.8%).

Research Question 3: Students’ Specific Preferences for ASEAN Cultural Content

This section analyzes students’ interests and preferences regarding ASEAN cultural content.

Level of Interest in ASEAN Culture

Table 6. Level of Interest in ASEAN Culture (N=529).

Level of Interest	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
1 = Not at all interested	18	3.4	3.4
2 = Not very interested	15	2.8	6.2
3 = Neutral	116	21.9	28.1
4 = Somewhat interested	258	48.8	76.9
5 = Very interested	122	23.1	100.0
Mean	3.83	-	-
Standard Deviation	1.05	-	-

Table 7. Content Preferences and Integration Methods (N=529, multiple responses permitted).

Category	Item	Selection %	Ranking
Content Types	Traditional Arts and Culture	72.4	1
	Festival and Custom Culture	68.2	2
	Traditional Costume Culture	64.3	3
	Architectural Arts Culture	56.3	4
	Religious Belief Culture	42.7	5
	Language and Script Culture	38.8	6
Integration Methods	Case Comparisons	78.3	1
	Digital Presentations	72.4	2
	Thematic Instruction	65.4	3
	Practical Activities	58.8	4
	Supplementary Classroom Explanations	52.3	5

Students demonstrate high levels of interest in ASEAN ethnic cultural content (Mean = 3.83), with 75.1% expressing being “somewhat interested” or “very interested” and only 6.2% indicating low interest (**Table 6**). Crucially, the interest level (3.83) was significantly higher than the overall satisfaction level with the current curriculum (3.27), creating a “high interest—low satisfaction” tension that indicates significant unmet student needs.

Most Interesting Content Types and Integration Methods

Analysis of student preferences reveals clear patterns that can inform curriculum content selection and organization (**Table 7**). “Traditional arts and culture” ranked highest (72.4%), followed by “festival customs and traditions” (68.2%) and “traditional clothing culture” (64.3%). Relatively lower interest was shown for “religious beliefs” (42.7%) and “language and script” (38.8%). Students strongly prefer interactive, comparative,

Table 8. Desired Proportion of ASEAN Content (N=529)

Proportion Expected	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 10%	34	6.4
10%-20%	78	14.7
20%-30%	173	32.7
30%-40%	150	28.4
40%-50%	115	21.7
More than 50%	79	14.9
Weighted average	3.50	32.5%

Table 9. Cross-Border Ethnic Contrast Teaching Needs (N=529).

Degree of Demand	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1=Very Unwanted	18	3.4
2=Somewhat Unwanted	29	5.5
3=Neutral	110	20.8
4=Somewhat Wanted	252	47.6
5=Very Wanted	120	22.7
Mean	3.81	-

and technology-enhanced integration methods: case comparisons (78.3%), digital presentations (72.4%), and thematic instruction (65.4%).

Expected Proportion of ASEAN Content and Cross-Border Ethnic Teaching

Students' expectations regarding the proportion of ASEAN ethnic cultural content in the curriculum concentrate in the 20%-40% range (**Table 8**), totaling 61.1% of students. Only 6.4% of students expect less than 10%, while 15.3% expect over 50% of course content to be ASEAN-related. The weighted average is approximately 32.5%.

Analysis of student interest in comparative teaching approaches reveals that 70.2% of students “strongly desire” or “somewhat desire” comparative teaching on cultures of Guangxi’s cross-border ethnic groups (e.g., Zhuang, Dai, Jing) with ASEAN nations (**Table 9**), with a mean demand level of 3.81.

Students demonstrate high levels of interest in ASEAN ethnic cultural content (Mean = 3.83), creating a clear “high interest—low satisfaction” tension structure as interest level significantly exceeds overall satisfaction with the current curriculum (3.27). Preferred content types strongly favor visual and experiential cultural expressions: traditional arts and

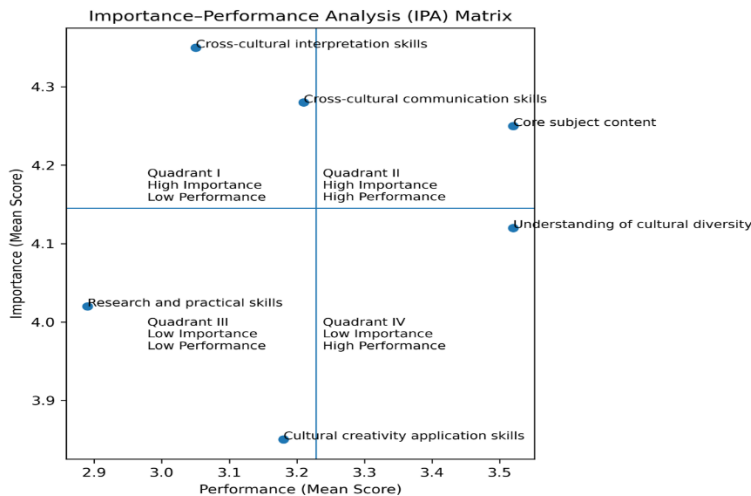


Figure 1: IPA Four-Quadrant Analysis.

culture (72.4%), festival customs (68.2%), and traditional clothing (64.3%). Students strongly prefer interactive, comparative, and technology-enhanced integration methods: case comparisons (78.3%), digital presentations (72.4%), and thematic instruction (65.4%). Expected proportion of ASEAN content concentrates in the 20%-40% range (61.1% of students), with a weighted average of approximately 32.5%. Cross-border ethnic comparative teaching also garners strong interest (70.2%) when presented as a specific approach.

Research Question Four: Content Optimization Strategies Based on Student Needs

This section synthesizes the preceding findings to propose course content optimization strategies grounded in student needs.

Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA)

The Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) provides a systematic method for identifying priority areas for curriculum reform by comparing student-perceived importance of various competencies with perceived performance of the current curriculum in developing those competencies. Q20-Q24 (importance of five core competencies) served as the “Importance” dimension, while Q6-Q11 (current curriculum evaluation)

formed the “Performance” dimension. Mean values were calculated for each dimension, and a four-quadrant diagram was plotted using mean importance and mean performance as dividing lines.

The IPA quadrant analysis reveals clear strategic priorities for curriculum reform (**Figure 1**). The first quadrant, representing “Priority Improvement Areas” (high importance, low performance), encompasses intercultural interpretation skills (importance 4.35/performance 3.05), intercultural communication skills (4.28/3.21), and research and practical skills (4.02/2.89). These three dimensions are perceived by students as the most critical yet demonstrate the weakest curricular performance, representing urgent priorities for curriculum improvement.

The second quadrant, representing “Strengths Maintenance Zones” (high importance, high performance), encompasses cultural creativity application skills (3.85/3.18), cultural diversity understanding (4.12/3.52), and core disciplinary content (4.25/3.52). These areas have established relative strengths and should be sustained while maintaining focus on priority improvement areas identified in the first quadrant.

The IPA analysis provides clear strategic direction: while maintaining existing strengths in core disciplinary content and cultural diversity understanding, the curriculum should prioritize addressing significant shortcomings in developing intercultural interpretation, communication, and research practice skills. These priority areas align closely with previously identified core gaps: insufficient coverage of ASEAN cultural content and weak practical application components. This strategic prioritization suggests that effective curriculum reform should focus on shifting from knowledge transmission toward capability building, particularly in areas where student needs are high but current performance is low.

Discussion

This chapter interprets research findings in light of theoretical frameworks and prior research, examining implications for curriculum design, identifying contradictions and patterns requiring deeper analysis, and proposing practical recommendations grounded in empirical evidence.

Interpreting “High Interest—Low Understanding” Tension

One of the study’s most significant findings is the tension between high student interest in ASEAN cultures and relatively low actual understand-

ing, with 75.1% of students expressing strong interest but only 23.4% possessing deep understanding. This “high interest—low understanding” paradox challenges assumptions that geographical proximity or institutional positioning automatically translates into cultural knowledge, while simultaneously revealing both opportunities and challenges for curriculum reform.

Several factors likely contribute to this paradox. First, the predominance of informal digital channels (78.3% through short videos/documentaries) for exposure to ASEAN culture creates fragmented, superficial engagement that generates interest without systematic understanding. Students may encounter isolated facts, images, or narratives that spark curiosity without developing comprehensive knowledge or critical analytical frameworks. Second, limited formal curriculum coverage of ASEAN content (only 52.4% encountering it through classroom instruction) means that students’ interests are not being systematically nurtured through structured educational experiences. The substantial difference in understanding between students with and without prior ASEAN learning experiences (means of 3.45 vs. 2.78) demonstrates that formal educational channels are far more effective for developing deep understanding than informal digital exposure.

This finding has important theoretical implications for intercultural competence development. It suggests that while informal cultural exposure can generate interest and foundational awareness, systematic educational intervention is necessary for developing deeper understanding and analytical capabilities that constitute true intercultural competence. This supports theoretical perspectives emphasizing the importance of structured learning experiences in developing cultural knowledge, critical awareness, and communicative competence (Byram, 2021; Dearsdorff, 2006).

Structural Curriculum Gaps and Pedagogical Challenges

Finding that “integration of ASEAN materials” received the lowest curriculum satisfaction rating (M=2.89) alongside high student interest (75.1%) creates a clear mandate for curricular enhancement. However, student-identified challenges suggest that addressing this content gap must occur in conjunction with pedagogical improvements to be effective.

The prominence of pedagogical challenges—theoretical abstraction (62.8%), disconnect from practice (58.2%), and unengaging content

(54.3%)—suggests that content improvements alone will be insufficient. Instead, comprehensive reform is needed that addresses what content is taught, how it is taught, and through what means students engage with it. This aligns with theoretical frameworks emphasizing that effective intercultural education requires integration of content, pedagogical approaches, and educational environments (Leask, 2015; Banks, 2015).

Students' strong preferences for case comparisons (78.3%), digital presentations (72.4%), and practical activities (58.8%) alongside low satisfaction with theoretical abstraction suggest clear directions for pedagogical reform. Comparative approaches can help students identify patterns across cultures while developing analytical skills, while digital and practical methods can make abstract concepts more accessible and engaging. This aligns with contemporary learning science research emphasizing the importance of active, experiential, and technology-enhanced learning approaches for developing complex competencies (Landorf et al., 2018).

Relatively low interest in religious beliefs (42.7%) and language/script content (38.8%) compared to traditional arts, festivals, and costume (all above 64%) presents both challenges and opportunities. While these areas are important for comprehensive cultural understanding, their abstract nature requires careful instructional design to make them accessible and engaging to students with varying backgrounds and interests. Approaches might include integrating religious and linguistic content within case studies, visual presentations, or comparative frameworks that demonstrate their relevance to contemporary issues, intercultural communication, or students' professional interests.

Furthermore, the contradictions revealed in student responses warrant deeper consideration. The finding that students strongly prefer cross-border ethnic comparative teaching (70.2%) when presented specifically, yet do not prioritize it when asked generally about improvement areas (38.2%), reveals an important gap between students' latent interests and their articulated awareness of needs. This pattern suggests that students may have limited capacity to envision innovative curriculum approaches or recognize the potential value of content they have not previously experienced. It underscores the importance of educational leadership in curriculum reform—not merely responding to stated student preferences, but also introducing and promoting approaches that students may not yet recognize as valuable but which, when properly implemented, generate strong engagement and address important educational objectives.

Three-Tiered Student Need Structure

Student needs emerge as forming a three-tiered structure of “understanding-practice-innovation.” The highest priority competencies identified through IPA—intercultural interpretation, intercultural communication, and research practice capabilities—suggest that students recognize a need not just for cultural knowledge but for applied capabilities to interpret, communicate across, and conduct research about cultural contexts.

This three-tiered structure aligns with contemporary frameworks for intercultural competence that emphasize the integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Byram, 2021; Deardorff, 2006). Students’ prioritization of interpretation and communication skills suggests awareness of the practical demands of intercultural interaction in contemporary professional contexts, while interest in research practice suggests recognition of the value of systematic inquiry about cultural phenomena.

Strong preferences for practical application content (65.4%), digital resources (58.8%), and applied teaching methods suggest that students want learning experiences that connect theory to practice, employ contemporary technologies, and develop applicable skills. This aligns with student-centered learning approaches that emphasize relevance, application, and skill development alongside knowledge acquisition (Killick, 2018).

This structure has important implications for curriculum organization. Rather than simply adding ASEAN content to existing course formats, curriculum reform should consider organizing content through a progressive framework that moves from foundational understanding to applied practice to innovative application, with appropriate teaching methods and assessments aligned to each tier. The three-tiered structure of “understanding-practice-innovation” reveals important alignment with contemporary frameworks for twenty-first century competencies while also reflecting distinctive characteristics of China-ASEAN educational contexts.

Comparison with Prior Research

Comparing findings with prior research reveals both consistencies and distinctive features. Li and Nguyen’s (2023) study of business students’ intercultural competence development in China-ASEAN contexts found strong demand for practical, professionally-oriented content that prepares students for intercultural business contexts. The current study’s finding of strong student demand for practical application content and applied competencies aligns with this prior research, suggesting that across disci-

plines, students recognize the practical value of intercultural competencies for career preparation.

However, the current study's finding of strong interest in comparative cultural approaches (70.2% for cross-border ethnic contrast teaching) represents a distinctive feature of liberal arts students compared to business-focused studies. This suggests that humanities students may have particular interest in and aptitude for comparative cultural analysis that leverages regional similarities and differences. This comparative orientation may represent a unique contribution of liberal arts programs to intercultural education that should be leveraged and further developed.

Finding about the predominance of digital informal learning channels aligns with broader trends identified in educational research about student learning habits in the digital age (Darwin & Prasodjo, 2025). However, this study adds specificity about digital channel preferences in ASEAN cultural learning context, finding that short videos and documentaries dominate over other digital sources. This has implications for curriculum resource development and suggests partnerships with content producers or development of institutional digital resources could address quality concerns associated with informal digital learning.

Comparing findings with prior research beyond the China-ASEAN context reveals both broader patterns and distinctive features relevant to intercultural education. Studies of multi-ethnic education in Western contexts have identified similar tensions between student interest and understanding, with research in European universities finding that while students express strong interest in learning about diverse cultures, their actual knowledge and competencies often fall short (Beacco et al., 2016). This suggests that the "high interest-low understanding" tension identified in this study may be a more general phenomenon in intercultural education.

Research on intercultural competence development in language education contexts also reveals patterns consistent with study findings. Studies of foreign language learners in East Asian contexts have found that students often prioritize practical communication skills over deeper cultural understanding, reflecting instrumental motivations for language learning (Banjongjit & Boonmoh, 2018). However, the current study's finding that liberal arts students prioritize intercultural interpretation skills alongside communication skills suggests different motivations or educational contexts. This may reflect humanities programs' emphasis on critical analysis and cultural literacy, or it may indicate growing recognition among students of the importance of nuanced cultural understanding for effective intercultural engagement beyond mere language proficiency.

Studies of curriculum internationalization in Chinese higher education have documented challenges similar to those identified in this study. Research by Guo et al. (2022) found that Chinese universities face significant structural barriers to internationalizing curriculum, including faculty training needs, resource constraints, and rigid curriculum frameworks. These challenges align with student-identified pedagogical issues in the current study: theoretical abstraction, disconnect from practice, and outdated materials. This suggests that curriculum reform for ASEAN content integration must address broader institutional challenges rather than merely adding content or changing teaching methods.

Integrating Findings into Curriculum Optimization Recommendations

Based on the synthesis of findings, theoretical frameworks, and comparison with prior research, this study proposes a comprehensive curriculum optimization framework that addresses identified gaps while building on existing strengths. The framework includes four interconnected components:

Content System: “Understanding (30%)—Practice (40%)—Innovation (30%)”

This progressive framework organizes ASEAN cultural content into three tiers: (1) Foundational understanding of ASEAN’s cultural diversity, historical contexts, and regional characteristics (30%); (2) Applied practice through case comparisons, scenario analysis, and intercultural communication exercises (40%); and (3) Innovative application through research projects, comparative studies, and creative outputs (30%). This structure responds to students’ three-tiered need structure while ensuring balanced coverage of knowledge, skills, and higher-order thinking.

Four Core Teaching Methods

Case Comparisons: Structured comparative analyses of cultural practices across ASEAN countries and with China, leveraging cross-border ethnic similarities to deepen understanding of cultural patterns and differences.

Digital Displays: Multi-media presentations using documentaries, virtual tours, interactive maps, and digital storytelling to engage visual learners and leverage students' digital literacy.

Thematic Instruction: Organizing content around cross-cutting themes such as "Festivals and Identity," "Religious Pluralism," "Migration and Diaspora," or "Economic Integration and Culture" to promote interdisciplinary understanding.

Practical Activities: Field studies, cultural immersion projects, simulated intercultural scenarios, and collaborative research with ASEAN university partners to develop applied competencies.

Three Resource Libraries

Visual Materials Library: High-quality images, videos, virtual tours, and interactive exhibits showcasing traditional arts, festivals, architecture, and daily life across ASEAN cultures.

Ethnic Cultural Texts Library: Carefully curated readings on religious traditions, philosophical systems, literary works, and historical documents with contextual notes and discussion questions.

Contemporary Application Cases Library: Real-world case studies from business, diplomacy, cultural exchange, and community development demonstrating intercultural competence in practice.

Three Competency Development Pathways

Intercultural Interpretation Pathway: Developing skills for analyzing, explaining, and critically evaluating cultural phenomena through comparative frameworks and theoretical perspectives.

Intercultural Communication Pathway: Building capabilities for effective communication across cultural boundaries through language training, non-verbal communication, and interactive practice.

Research Practice Pathway: Cultivating systematic inquiry skills through training in research methods, field studies, and collaborative projects addressing intercultural questions.

This comprehensive framework addresses the core gaps identified through student needs assessment: insufficient ASEAN content coverage, weak practical application components, and underdeveloped applied competencies. By integrating content, pedagogy, resources, and assessment within a coherent framework, it moves beyond superficial additions to create transformative learning experiences that develop the intercultural

competencies needed for effective engagement in China-ASEAN contexts.

Research Limitations

This study has several specific limitations that should be acknowledged:

First, the sample was restricted to undergraduate students from the College of Liberal Arts at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages (GUFL). This single-institution sample significantly constrains the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Future research should expand to multi-institutional comparisons across different types of universities in various border regions.

Second, the use of a self-report questionnaire introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, potentially leading to overestimation of students' interest in multi-ethnic cultures or underestimation of learning challenges. Students may report higher levels of interest or understanding than they actually possess due to perceived social expectations.

Third, the cross-sectional survey design captures data at a single point in time, making it impossible to determine the sources of variations in cultural understanding across different grade levels. For instance, the observed differences between first-year and third-year students may reflect grade-level progression or could be attributed to other factors such as differences in admissions policies, student backgrounds, or cohort effects. Longitudinal studies would be better positioned to isolate the effects of curriculum exposure and learning progression.

Fourth, the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) methodology employed in this study uses mean-split approach to establish the dividing lines between quadrants. This methodological approach has been criticized as overly simplistic, as the quadrant distribution can vary across different student subgroups (e.g., different majors, grade levels, or prior experience levels). Subgroup analysis should be performed in future studies to examine whether priority areas for curriculum improvement differ across diverse student populations.

Fifth, while this study focuses on student needs, curriculum reform also requires consideration of faculty capacity, institutional resources, and administrative support, which were not examined in this research.

Conclusion

This study systematically examined student needs for integrating ASEAN cultural content into “Multi-Ethnic Culture” curriculum at a border region university. Findings reveal significant gaps between student interest and current understanding, structural deficiencies in curriculum content, clear preferences for specific content types and teaching methods, and identifiable priority areas for curriculum improvement.

The “high interest-low understanding” tension structure underscores both the receptiveness of students to ASEAN cultural content and the limitations of current educational approaches. Predominance of informal digital channels creates interest without systematic understanding, while limited formal curriculum coverage fails to leverage this interest for deeper learning. Structural curriculum gaps, particularly the low satisfaction with ASEAN content integration ($M=2.89$), create clear mandates for reform.

Student preferences for visual content, interactive methods, and practical application provide clear guidance for curriculum design. The three-tiered “understanding-practice-innovation” need structure aligns with contemporary intercultural competence frameworks and suggests that students recognize the importance of applied capabilities beyond mere knowledge acquisition. Importance-Performance Analysis identifies intercultural interpretation, communication, and research practice skills as priority improvement areas, providing empirical basis for targeted curriculum reform.

The proposed optimization framework—integrating progressive content systems, interactive teaching methods, rich resource libraries, and competency development pathways—provides comprehensive approach to addressing identified gaps while building on existing strengths. This framework responds to student needs, aligns with theoretical frameworks for intercultural competence development, and addresses institutional challenges documented in prior research.

This research expands theories on intercultural competence and “internationalization-localization” curriculum design, providing empirical evidence and operational strategies for border region universities to advance curriculum internationalization and serve China-ASEAN people-to-people exchanges. The findings have implications for curriculum reform at other border region universities facing similar challenges and contribute to broader discussions about preparing students for effective intercultural engagement in an increasingly interconnected world.

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