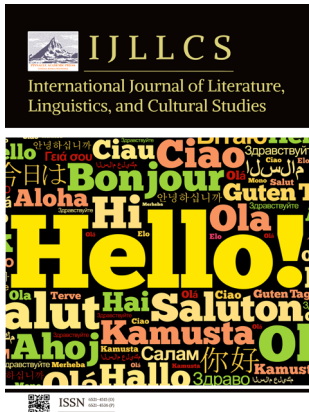


Article **Open Access**

# The Impact of Cultural Presupposition on HSK Listening Comprehension — A Case Study of "Chinese Festivals" and "Interpersonal Relationships" Topics

Yufei Duan <sup>1,\*</sup>



Received: 12 July 2025  
Revised: 24 July 2025  
Accepted: 12 August 2025  
Published: 16 August 2025



**Copyright:** © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

<sup>1</sup> Jilin Engineering Normal University, Changchun, Jilin, China  
\* Correspondence: Yufei Duan, Jilin Engineering Normal University, Changchun, Jilin, China

**Abstract:** This study examines the listening comprehension of international students at Jilin Engineering Normal University, focusing specifically on two significant cultural topics within the HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) listening tests: "Chinese Festivals" and "Interpersonal Relationships." It delves into the profound influence of cultural presupposition on listening comprehension and aims to identify practical countermeasures to mitigate the negative impact of cultural gaps. Through a combination of error analysis and teaching experiments, the study uncovers that international students tend to make frequent misjudgments during listening comprehension tests, primarily due to a lack of adequate cultural awareness. For instance, many students struggle to understand cultural symbols such as "ya sui qian" (lucky money) and "renqing wanglai" (human interaction), which are deeply ingrained in Chinese social practices. In response to these challenges, a series of targeted cultural supplementary teaching experiments were conducted. The findings suggest that the systematic introduction of cultural knowledge, specifically cultural presuppositions, significantly improves students' listening comprehension abilities. In particular, the accuracy rate of their responses to topics related to Chinese festivals and interpersonal relationships increased by an impressive 28.6%. These results highlight the critical role that cultural understanding plays in mastering listening comprehension, and the study underscores the importance of integrating cultural components into HSK listening instruction. By providing empirical evidence of the benefits of culturally enriched teaching, this research contributes valuable insights into how cultural factors can be effectively incorporated into language education to enhance international students' learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** listening comprehension; international students; cultural presupposition; HSK; Chinese festivals; interpersonal relationships

## 1. Introduction

As global educational exchanges continue to expand under the "Belt and Road" Initiative, the HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) has increasingly become a vital benchmark for evaluating the Chinese language proficiency of international students. However, the difficulty of the listening comprehension section of the HSK is not confined solely to linguistic challenges. In fact, a significant portion of the challenge lies in the cultural presuppositions embedded within the language. These cultural assumptions, which can be described as "shared background knowledge between communicators," often present an invisible barrier that hinders effective communication and understanding across cultures.

In the context of the HSK listening module, topics such as "Chinese Festivals" and "Interpersonal Relationships" are particularly susceptible to this issue, as they require not only linguistic skills but also a deep understanding of Chinese culture.

Since 2019, Jilin Engineering Normal University has been enrolling international students from diverse countries along the Belt and Road route, including Bangladesh, the Philippines, the Republic of the Congo (Brazzaville), Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. These students often face difficulties in comprehending listening materials related to culturally specific topics, such as the "Spring Festival red envelopes" and "Mid-Autumn reunion," or interpersonal phrases like "renqing wanglai" (the concept of human interaction) and "tuo guanxi" (the act of seeking connections). These phrases and customs are deeply rooted in Chinese society, and without a shared cultural context, students struggle to fully understand their meanings and implications [1].

Drawing from the learning experiences of international students at Jilin Engineering Normal University, this paper explores the role of cultural presuppositions in shaping HSK listening comprehension [2]. Through a combination of error analysis and teaching experiments, this research highlights the key mechanisms by which cultural gaps affect listening understanding and proposes targeted strategies for teaching these cultural concepts. The aim is to bridge the gap between language proficiency and cultural knowledge, ensuring that international students are better equipped to navigate the complexities of Chinese language and culture in the HSK listening context [3].

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Cultural Presupposition Theory and Second Language Comprehension

Cultural presupposition theory, which finds its roots in Frege's early logical studies, explores the "background information mutually assumed by both parties in discourse" that often goes unspoken but is essential for understanding communication. In the realm of second language acquisition, cultural presuppositions can be seen as the implicit knowledge that speakers share based on their cultural backgrounds. This knowledge includes values, customs, and practices that are specific to a given culture and must be learned through socialization [4]. For second language learners, even if they are proficient in linguistic forms, gaps in cultural knowledge can lead to significant comprehension challenges. These challenges often manifest as misunderstandings or misinterpretations, especially when the learner is faced with culturally loaded terms or concepts that do not have direct equivalents in their native culture [5].

### 2.2. Research on HSK Listening Comprehension

Numerous studies have shown that the difficulty level of the HSK listening comprehension section is closely tied to the degree of cultural familiarity and the cultural content embedded in the listening topics. For example, topics such as "Chinese Festivals" and "Interpersonal Relationships" are frequently tested and often contain specific cultural assumptions that are unfamiliar to international students. These topics involve references to cultural symbols, traditions, and behaviors—such as the practice of eating zongzi during the Dragon Boat Festival to honor a historical figure, or the symbolic meaning of red envelopes during the Spring Festival [6]. Students who are not familiar with these cultural practices tend to misunderstand their significance, which directly impacts their listening comprehension scores.

Furthermore, studies indicate that the error rate in listening comprehension tasks related to culturally rich topics is significantly higher compared to more neutral or universally relatable topics. International students, in particular, experience a higher frequency of mistakes—mainly because they lack the cultural presuppositions necessary for understanding the context and nuances of these cultural references. This gap in cultural knowledge can result in a 30% to 40% higher error rate on culturally loaded listening questions [7].

### *2.3. Empirical Research on Cultural Supplementary Teaching*

The importance of integrating cultural knowledge into language teaching has been widely acknowledged in academic circles. A key theoretical approach is the concept of "culturally enriched input," which suggests that exposure to comprehensible cultural content alongside language instruction helps to bridge gaps in understanding. Research on the effectiveness of cultural supplementation in language teaching has proven that when cultural background knowledge is integrated into lessons, students experience improved comprehension and greater engagement with the material [8].

For instance, scholars argue that when learners receive targeted cultural explanations within their language training, they are better able to grasp language structures, meaning, and context. This approach has been particularly successful in reading comprehension instruction, where cultural presuppositions can be more explicitly addressed. However, there is limited empirical research on the application of cultural supplementary teaching in HSK listening comprehension. The challenge lies in incorporating these cultural elements into the listening exercises in ways that allow students to process both the linguistic and cultural aspects simultaneously [9]. Thus, while the integration of culture into language education has shown promise, further research is needed to determine how best to implement cultural instruction within the context of listening comprehension.

## **3. Research Methods**

### *3.1. Research Subjects*

This study involved 34 international students from the 2019-2021 cohorts at Jilin Engineering Normal University. The participants came from a variety of countries along the Belt and Road route, including Bangladesh, the Philippines, the Republic of the Congo (Brazzaville), Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. All students had HSK Level 4-5 proficiency and were preparing for HSK Level 5, with an average learning duration of 2.5 years. These students were selected because they had sufficient language proficiency to participate in the listening comprehension tests, while also being exposed to topics and cultural elements that might present comprehension challenges [10].

### *3.2. Research Tools*

To evaluate the students' listening comprehension, a set of 40 questions was drawn from the 2022-2023 HSK Level 4 real exam papers, with 20 questions focusing on "Chinese Festivals" and 20 on "Interpersonal Relationships." These topics were selected for their cultural depth, as they are rich in culturally specific presuppositions that often pose challenges for international students. To analyze the types of errors made, a classification system was used, dividing them into two categories: linguistic form errors (including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) and cultural presupposition errors (such as misunderstandings of customs and values).

For the cultural supplementary teaching, self-compiled materials were developed. These materials included modules that explained key cultural concepts, such as the custom of giving "ya sui qian" (lucky money) during the Spring Festival and the significance of "guanxi" (connections) in Chinese society [11]. The goal was to provide students with deeper insights into Chinese culture to support their understanding of the language.

### *3.3. Research Process*

The research process followed a clear sequence to assess the effectiveness of cultural supplementary teaching. Initially, all 34 students completed the HSK listening test. The error data collected from this pre-test helped identify patterns in the students' mistakes and served as a baseline for comparison.

Next, 10 students who had the highest error rates in the pre-test were selected for semi-structured interviews. These interviews aimed to uncover the underlying causes of their errors, particularly in terms of cultural misunderstandings.

The students were then randomly assigned to either an experimental group or a control group, each consisting of 17 participants. The experimental group received 8 hours of cultural supplementary teaching, focusing on key cultural topics over the course of 4 weeks (2 hours per week). In contrast, the control group continued with regular listening training without cultural input [12].

After the teaching intervention, both groups completed a post-test designed to evaluate any improvements in their listening comprehension. The test was comparable in difficulty to the pre-test, and the results were analyzed to measure the impact of the cultural teaching on the students' performance.

#### 4. Research Results

##### 4.1. Types and Distribution of Cultural Presupposition Errors

The pre-test results revealed that the average accuracy rate of international students in the topics of "Chinese Festivals" and "Interpersonal Relationships" was only 52.3%. More notably, cultural presupposition errors accounted for a substantial 67.2% of the total errors, significantly outnumbering linguistic form errors (32.8%). This highlights the crucial role that cultural knowledge plays in listening comprehension, as many of the errors were not related to the students' language proficiency, but rather their unfamiliarity with culturally specific content. The errors were categorized into two major areas:

###### 1) Misunderstanding of Festival Customs (38.5%):

A significant number of students misinterpreted culturally rich activities. For example, they mistakenly regarded "appreciating the moon and eating mooncakes during the Mid-Autumn Festival" as a simple "culinary activity" without recognizing its deeper cultural meaning tied to family reunions. Similarly, the concept of "ya sui qian" (lucky money), a tradition where elders give money to younger family members during the Spring Festival, was misunderstood as "pocket money" rather than a symbolic act of blessing and protection. This demonstrates how deeply ingrained cultural practices can cause confusion when students are not familiar with their significance.

###### 2) Misinterpretation of Interpersonal Terms (28.7%):

The misunderstanding of interpersonal terms was another common issue. For example, "tuo guanxi" (seeking connections) was seen as simply "asking friends for help," overlooking its cultural significance as a practice deeply rooted in the concept of maintaining and fostering personal networks within Chinese society. Similarly, 8 students misunderstood "renqing wanglai" (human interaction), interpreting it as a one-sided transaction of help, rather than understanding it as a mutual exchange rooted in reciprocity and social obligations, which is central to Chinese culture.

In interviews, students expressed confusion about these cultural concepts. A Congolese student shared, "When I heard 'you need to give red envelopes during Spring Festival,' I thought money was mandatory to celebrate the festival, not knowing it was a way of blessing." Another Filipino student noted, "The word 'renqing' (human feelings) appears repeatedly in listening materials, but I don't understand its difference from 'youqing' (friendship)."

##### 4.2. Comparison of Teaching Experiment Effects

Post-test results revealed a significant improvement in the experimental group's performance, which had received cultural supplementary teaching. The average accuracy rate of the experimental group increased to 80.9%, while the control group's accuracy rate remained at 59.7%. This represents a substantial improvement of 28.6% for the experimental group, compared to only 7.4% for the control group [13]. This difference underscores the effectiveness of integrating cultural knowledge into language instruction. The improvements were observed in both festival-related and interpersonal topics:

###### 1) Accuracy in Festival Topics:

The experimental group showed a dramatic increase from 49.2% to 82.5%. In comparison, the control group's accuracy rate increased modestly from 51.3% to 62.1%. This suggests that understanding cultural context significantly enhanced the experimental group's ability to accurately interpret festival-related listening tasks.

#### 2) Accuracy in Interpersonal Relationship Topics:

The experimental group also saw substantial improvement, with accuracy rising from 55.4% to 79.3%. The control group, by contrast, saw only a slight improvement from 53.5% to 57.3%, further emphasizing the impact of cultural knowledge in improving comprehension of interpersonal dynamics.

A student from the experimental group shared feedback, saying, "After learning the meaning of 'ya sui qian,' I can immediately understand the speaker's intention when hearing related dialogues." This demonstrates that the cultural supplementary lessons not only clarified the meaning of specific terms but also helped students engage with the language in a more contextually informed way, reducing barriers to comprehension.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Mechanism of Cultural Presupposition's Impact on HSK Listening Comprehension

This study highlights the significant role that cultural presuppositions play in shaping international students' listening comprehension. Specifically, cultural presupposition affects understanding through what can be described as a "failure of cognitive activation." When students lack the relevant cultural background knowledge, they are unable to activate the necessary presuppositions in their minds, which leads to misinterpretations and cognitive gaps in their discourse processing. For example, in the HSK listening section, the topic of "difficulty of returning home during Spring Festival" implies a fundamental cultural assumption: "reunion is the core value of Spring Festival." International students who are unfamiliar with this cultural premise struggle to comprehend the emotional reasoning behind the phrase "returning home no matter how difficult it is," which is not just about physical travel, but about fulfilling the deep emotional and cultural value of family reunion.

Moreover, the differences in students' home cultures significantly impact their ability to grasp Chinese cultural presuppositions. For example, students from Southeast Asian countries like Bangladesh and the Philippines may not have extensive exposure to Chinese cultural practices, resulting in greater difficulty understanding culturally embedded concepts. Additionally, students from regions such as the Republic of the Congo or Middle Eastern countries may encounter even more substantial differences in festival traditions, family values, and social interaction norms, making the gap in cultural understanding even wider. These cultural distances exacerbate the challenge of interpreting implicit cultural information, making it difficult for students to decode the nuanced meanings embedded in language that rely on shared cultural experiences.

### 5.2. Principle of Effectiveness in Cultural Supplementary Teaching

The positive outcomes of the teaching experiment further confirm the applicability of cultural supplementary teaching, which aligns with established theories on language acquisition. Providing targeted cultural input helps international students build a "cultural presupposition knowledge base," allowing them to quickly make sense of implicit information presented in the language. For instance, when students are taught that "red envelopes" symbolize blessings and are not merely an obligation, they can immediately connect this concept to the "etiquette custom" cognitive framework during listening tasks. Instead of interpreting "giving red envelopes during Spring Festival" purely as a monetary exchange, they can recognize it as a culturally rich practice with deeper emotional and social connotations, such as familial love and the wish for prosperity.

This understanding goes beyond improving students' HSK scores. Given that most international students at Jilin Engineering Normal University are majoring in applied



fields, such as International Economy and Trade or Computer Science, they are likely to encounter Chinese cultural contexts in their future careers, especially when interacting with Chinese partners, colleagues, or clients. Therefore, supplementary knowledge of cultural presuppositions not only enhances their academic performance but also contributes significantly to their ability to engage in meaningful intercultural communication. The ability to understand and navigate Chinese cultural norms and practices will be invaluable in both their professional and personal lives, allowing them to establish stronger connections and better participate in cross-cultural exchanges.

Furthermore, this cultural supplementary approach provides a bridge between academic language training and real-world application. By fostering cultural awareness alongside language skills, students gain a more holistic understanding of the language, which enhances their overall communication proficiency. This strategy not only addresses the immediate challenges faced by international students in mastering the HSK listening section but also prepares them for long-term success in a globalized world where cultural understanding is essential.

## 6. Conclusions and Teaching Strategies

### 6.1. Research Conclusions

This study reveals that cultural presupposition is a significant factor affecting international students' listening comprehension in the HSK exam, particularly in topics related to "Chinese Festivals" and "Interpersonal Relationships." International students tend to misjudge these topics largely due to a lack of cultural knowledge, as they are unfamiliar with key cultural concepts that form the basis of the dialogues. While linguistic proficiency is essential, it alone cannot guarantee understanding, especially when the content is rich with cultural references. The results suggest that systematic cultural supplementary teaching, which integrates cultural knowledge with language instruction, has a much greater impact on improving listening comprehension compared to traditional linguistic training alone. This approach helps students bridge the gap between language and culture, enabling them to better understand the underlying meanings of dialogues.

### 6.2. Teaching Strategies

Based on the findings of this study, it is clear that integrating cultural knowledge into language teaching is essential for improving listening comprehension. To achieve this, teachers should focus on building students' cultural awareness alongside their language skills. One effective approach is to incorporate cultural presuppositions into regular language lessons. For instance, teachers can create visual aids that highlight key cultural concepts commonly found in HSK topics, such as "ya sui qian" (lucky money) or "renqing wanglai" (human interaction), and provide contextual explanations that go beyond the literal meaning of words. This helps students connect linguistic elements with their cultural significance, facilitating deeper understanding during listening exercises.

Additionally, multimedia resources such as videos or situational dramas can be used to demonstrate cultural practices. For example, a video showing the process of giving red envelopes during the Spring Festival can help students understand the ritual's emotional and social importance. Organizing hands-on activities, such as making mooncakes for the Mid-Autumn Festival or simulating dialogues about "guanxi" (connections), can also help students engage with the culture in a more experiential way. These activities reinforce cultural knowledge and provide students with opportunities to practice the language in realistic contexts.

Moreover, teachers can adapt existing HSK materials by adding cultural explanations after listening exercises. These "cultural tips" could help students identify implicit cultural information in the dialogue, allowing them to connect the language used with the cultural

concepts behind it. Such adaptations make the learning process more comprehensive, ensuring that students not only improve their language skills but also their ability to understand the cultural context in which the language is used.

### 6.3. Research Limitations and Prospects

While this study provides valuable insights, there are several limitations that should be addressed in future research. The small sample size of 34 students from a single university limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could expand the sample to include students from multiple universities, providing a broader perspective on the impact of cultural supplementary teaching. Additionally, the long-term effects of this teaching method on listening comprehension should be explored through longitudinal research, tracking students' progress over time.

Future research could also incorporate more advanced techniques, such as eye-tracking, to gain deeper insights into how students process cultural presuppositions during listening comprehension. Eye-tracking could reveal how students engage with culturally specific content and help identify the points where they encounter difficulties. Combining such innovative research methods with practical teaching strategies would provide a more detailed understanding of how cultural knowledge influences second language learning and listening comprehension.

## References

1. A. A. S. Halali, et al., "Understanding EFL International Students' Academic Listening Strategies: A Literature," *Int. J. Learn. Teach. Educ. Res.*, vol. 21, no. 11, pp. 152-172, 2022, doi: 10.26803/ijlter.21.11.9.
2. L. Wang and P. D. MacIntyre, "Second language listening comprehension: The role of anxiety and enjoyment in listening metacognitive awareness," *Stud. Second Lang. Learn. Teach.*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 491-515, 2021.
3. N. Wakamoto and H. Rose, "Learning to listen strategically: Developing a listening comprehension strategies questionnaire for learning English as a global language," *System*, vol. 103, p. 102670, 2021, doi: 10.1016/j.system.2021.102670.
4. S.-Y. Shin, S. Lee, and R. Lidster, "Examining the effects of different English speech varieties on an L2 academic listening comprehension test at the item level," *Lang. Test.*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 580-601, 2021, doi: 10.1177/0265532220985432.
5. G. Du and D. Man, "Mediating effect of metacognition on the relationship between listening self-efficacy and L2 listening comprehension," *Asia-Pacific Educ. Res.*, vol. 32, no. 5, pp. 655-664, 2023, doi: 10.1007/s40299-022-00684-z.
6. M. H. Al-Khreshah and S. F. Alruwaili, "Metacognition in listening comprehension: Analyzing strategies and gender differences among Saudi EFL university students," *Cogent Soc. Sci.*, vol. 10, no. 1, p. 2291954, 2024, doi: 10.1080/23311886.2023.2291954.
7. İ. Demirbaş and A. Şahin, "The Effect of Digital Stories on Primary School Students' Listening Comprehension Skills," *Participatory Educ. Res.*, vol. 9, no. 6, pp. 380-397, 2022, doi: 10.17275/per.22.144.9.6.
8. T. Hao, et al., "Effects of dual subtitles on Chinese students' English listening comprehension and vocabulary learning," *Asia-Pacific Educ. Res.*, vol. 31, no. 5, pp. 529-540, 2022, doi: 10.1007/s40299-021-00601-w.
9. D. Fung and E. Macaro, "Exploring the relationship between linguistic knowledge and strategy use in listening comprehension," *Lang. Teach. Res.*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 540-564, 2021, doi: 10.1177/1362168819868879.
10. Q. Chen and D. Ou, "The effects of classroom reverberation time and traffic noise on English listening comprehension of Chinese university students," *Appl. Acoust.*, vol. 179, p. 108082, 2021, doi: 10.1016/j.apacoust.2021.108082.
11. S. Ebadi, F. Nozari, and A. R. Salman, "Investigating the effects of flipped vocabulary learning via an online dictionary on EFL learners' listening comprehension," *Smart Learn. Environ.*, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 28, 2022, doi: 10.1186/s40561-022-00209-7.
12. X. Bian, X. Cai, and D. Cai, "The contributions of listening and reading vocabularies to listening comprehension of Chinese EFL students," *Int. J. Listen.*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 110-122, 2021, doi: 10.1080/10904018.2019.1623678.
13. S. Mirza Suzani, "Investigating the effect of podcasting on Iranian senior undergraduate TEFL students' listening comprehension improvement and motivation," *Asia-Pacific Educ. Res.*, vol. 30, no. 5, pp. 395-408, 2021, doi: 10.1007/s40299-020-00526-w.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The views, opinions, and data expressed in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of PAP and/or the editor(s). PAP and/or the editor(s) disclaim any responsibility for any injury to individuals or damage to property arising from the ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content.