

Original Paper

The Practical Path of Cultivating Intercultural Communication Ability in College English Teaching

Linyuan Qiu¹

¹ Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Hainan, China

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Abstract

With the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative and the ongoing development of the Hainan Free Trade Port, Chinese college students—particularly graduates from local universities in Hainan—are encountering increasing opportunities for international engagement. However, many students exhibit signs of “cultural aphasia” when participating in cross-cultural communication. To address this issue, this study examines the underlying causes and proposes corresponding teaching strategies and recommendations aimed at equipping students with intercultural awareness and skills, thereby facilitating more effective English learning and cultural exchange.

Keywords

intercultural communication, College English teaching, Ability cultivation

1. Introduction

The deepening of economic globalization has led to a surge in cross-cultural interactions across various fields including business, education, and diplomacy, making the cultivation of intercultural communication competence an indispensable component of college English education in today's interconnected world. The “Guidelines for College English Teaching (2020 Edition)” explicitly identifies “intercultural education” as a key objective of the curriculum, emphasizing its vital role in preparing students for global engagement. Cai (2019a) comprehensive survey of college students and their instructors reveals a shared desire to enhance students' ability to not only absorb and convey information effectively in English, but also to navigate complex intercultural situations with sensitivity and adaptability, all within the constraints of limited public English class hours. Against this backdrop, addressing the current shortcomings in college English teaching—particular overemphasis on mechanical training of linguistic forms (such as grammar rules and test-taking techniques) at the expense of systematic cultural awareness and communication skills development, as well as the lack of

authentic intercultural practice opportunities—has become a critical challenge that requires immediate attention in advancing pedagogical reform to meet the demands of our increasingly globalized society. These challenges are particularly pressing given China’s growing international influence and the need to cultivate a new generation of globally competent professionals.

2. Analysis of the Core Dimensions of Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural communication competence is a multidimensional comprehensive competence system, which mainly includes three core levels: knowledge, awareness, and skills. These levels are interrelated and together form the foundation for effective communication among students in cross-cultural contexts.

At the knowledge level, intercultural communication competence first requires learners to master the explicit cultural knowledge of the target language country, including historical traditions, values, social customs, and communication etiquette. At the same time, it is necessary to understand the cultural logic behind the language and avoid misunderstandings caused by cultural differences. For example, in English, “individualism” emphasizes individual autonomy and independence, often with a positive connotation, while in Chinese, “个人主义” often implies a negative connotation of selfishness and disregard for the collective. Another example is that Chinese people are used to “吃了没?” as a daily greeting, but if translated literally as “Have you eaten?” in English, native speakers may mistake the other person for inviting them to dinner. These examples demonstrate that language learning must be combined with cultural background to truly achieve effective communication.

At the awareness level, the cultivation of cross-cultural competence requires learners to gradually adjust their cultural cognition and attitudes. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity proposed by American scholar Bennett describes six developmental stages of intercultural sensitivity and communication, beginning with denial (the perception that one’s cultural perspective is the only real, accurate, or valid interpretation of reality) and culminating with integration (the internalization of multicultural awareness and the ability to interact productively across cultural differences). However, surveys have shown that many Chinese students tend to remain in the “defense stage”, which means they tend to judge other cultural behaviors based on their own cultural standards. For example, some students believe that it is impolite for Westerners to express their opinions directly, but fail to understand that this may be due to differences in cultural communication styles. Therefore, college English teaching should help students overcome cultural biases and cultivate an open and inclusive cultural attitude.

At the skill level, cross-cultural communication competence emphasizes practical application, including conflict resolution, adaptation strategies, and effective communication skills. For example, in business negotiations, Chinese representatives may be accustomed to expressing their thoughts in silence, while Western negotiators may mistake this for a negative attitude. To avoid conflicts and achieve effective communication, students with cross-cultural competence can actively explain cultural

differences to avoid misunderstandings. In addition, learners also need to master cultural adaptation strategies, such as observation and imitation, proactive inquiry, and empathy, to flexibly adjust their communication styles in different cultural environments.

Overall, the cultivation of cross-cultural communication skills requires the coordinated development of knowledge, awareness, and skills. College English teaching should be based on language training and systematically integrate cultural comparison, case analysis, and situational simulation to help students truly possess cross-cultural communication skills in the era of globalization.

3. The Main Problems of Cross-cultural Cultivation in Current College English Teaching

3.1 Structural Imbalance in the Content of the Textbook

The widely used college English textbooks currently have significant shortcomings in the arrangement of cultural content. Taking New Horizon College English (the third edition) published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press as an example, the content of Western culture in the textbook is relatively large, while the introduction of national culture and Chinese culture along the “the Belt and Road” is seriously insufficient. It is worth noting that these limited cultural knowledge are only scattered in the “background information” section of each unit, lacking systematic cultural comparative analysis and in-depth interpretation. For example, when explaining the Western holiday Thanksgiving Day, the textbooks rarely compare it with traditional festivals such as China's Mid-Autumn Festival at the value level, which makes it difficult for students to establish a cognitive framework for cross-cultural understanding.

3.2 Lack of Contextualized Training in Teaching Methods

The cultivation of cross-cultural competence requires experiential and interactive teaching methods, but the current situation is worrying. Many college English teachers still use the traditional teaching model of “language point explanation & text memorization” simplifying cultural teaching to the imparting of factual knowledge, and rarely organizing immersive training such as cross-cultural role-playing and simulated international conferences in the classroom. This single teaching method makes it difficult for students to flexibly apply cultural knowledge in real foreign-related scenarios even if they have mastered it. For example, in the highly practical topic of “How to deal with cultural conflicts in business negotiations”, most students only stay at the theoretical cognitive level and lack necessary practical training.

3.3 Evaluation System Oriented towards Utilitarianism

The current evaluation mechanism seriously restricts the in-depth development of cross-cultural teaching. This evaluation orientation directly leads to a utilitarian teaching tendency of “teaching what is tested”, causing both teachers and students to focus their energy on mechanical language training. What is even more alarming is that the evaluation of English courses in most universities currently relies entirely on standardized exams, lacking a process based assessment of students' performance in real cross-cultural scenarios. For example, few schools include “cross-cultural case analysis reports” or

"simulated performance in foreign-related situations" in their curriculum assessment system, which fundamentally weakens the importance that teachers and students attach to the cultivation of cultural abilities.

These problems make it difficult for college English teaching to meet the training needs of international talents for the construction of the "the Belt and Road" and the development of Hainan Free Trade Port. To overcome this dilemma, systematic changes can be made from three dimensions: optimizing the curriculum system, innovating teaching methods, and reforming evaluation methods.

4. Feasible Path for Cultivating Intercultural Communication Competence in College English

4.1 Progressive Optimization of Curriculum System

Within the existing framework of university English courses, it is recommended to adopt an "embedded" cultural teaching model. Taking "New Horizon College English" as an example, teachers can add a "cultural perspective" section (15-20 minutes) in each unit to focus on the cultural phenomena involved in the text. When explaining the unit of "education", we can compare the differences in classroom interaction modes between China and the West: Chinese students tend to listen quietly, while western students are more accustomed to actively asking questions. This kind of fine-tuning does not require significant changes to the curriculum structure and can effectively increase the proportion of cultural teaching. At the same time, it is suggested that the English teaching and research departments of universities organize the compilation of a "Supplementary Reader on Intercultural Cases" to collect 30-40 typical cultural conflict cases as supporting materials for existing textbooks.

4.2 Practical Innovation of Teaching Methods

a. Normalized application of case teaching

In terms of innovative teaching methods, the normalized application of case teaching is an effective way to enhance students' cross-cultural communication skills. Teachers can incorporate cultural case analysis as a regular teaching component and schedule 1-2 specialized seminars per month. This type of case analysis activity only takes 10-15 minutes of classroom time, but can concretize abstract cross-cultural theories through the reproduction of real business scenarios.

b. Flexible use of digital resources

In terms of integrating digital teaching resources, it is recommended to establish a systematic "online+offline" blended learning mode. Teachers can select high-quality digital resources as auxiliary teaching materials, such as inspiring content from TED talks and cross-cultural adaptation short videos. The specific implementation can adopt the "three-step" teaching method: assign a 10-minute video self-learning task before class, requiring students to record key cultural phenomena; Organize group discussions in the classroom, with a focus on analyzing cultural conflicts presented in the video and their resolution strategies; Extended reading of relevant cultural theory literature after class. This teaching model does not change the existing course schedule, optimizes the allocation of teaching

resources, and can also stimulate learning interest through multimedia materials, making cultural teaching more vivid and intuitive. In addition, it can also cultivate students' learning habits of independently exploring cultural differences.

4.3 Improvement and Adjustment of Evaluation Methods

In the face of the utilitarian tendency in the current evaluation system, it is recommended to adopt a "gradual improvement" strategy, while maintaining the existing examination framework, to optimize cross-cultural competence evaluation through the following improvement measures:

a. Strengthening process evaluation

In the current evaluation system for college English teaching, the strengthening of process evaluation is a key breakthrough in enhancing the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication skills training. It is suggested to establish a multidimensional process evaluation mechanism centered on cultural reflection logs and small-scale situational tests: firstly, students are required to complete 3-5 cultural reflection logs during the semester, and systematically cultivate cultural awareness by recording and analyzing students' cognitive changes, emotional experiences, and behavioral adjustments in cross-cultural communication; Secondly, design a series of scenario tests, such as simulating writing foreign-related business emails, handling cross-cultural customer complaints, explaining Chinese cultural phenomena, and other practical tasks, with a focus on examining students' cultural adaptation and problem-solving abilities in simulated scenarios. This evaluation model of "reflection+practice" can not only maintain compatibility with the existing curriculum system, but also effectively guide students to shift from passive acceptance of cultural knowledge to active development of cross-cultural communication skills.

b. Optimization of final exam question types

In the final evaluation stage, the dimension of cross-cultural competence testing should be strengthened by optimizing the types of final exam questions. Suggestions for improvement can be made in the following two aspects: adding 1-2 cultural comparison articles in the reading comprehension section (such as analyzing the differences in educational concepts between China and the United States or comparing business etiquette between the East and the West), requiring students to be able to analyze the underlying reasons for cultural differences based on their understanding of the text; At the same time, the writing section innovatively introduces the "Cultural Phenomenon Review" question type, such as requiring students to compare and analyze Chinese and Western holiday customs (such as the social function differences between Spring Festival and Christmas) or daily communication behaviors (such as the different attitudes towards "silence" between China and the United States), with a focus on testing students' cultural interpretation ability and critical thinking. This type of question optimization can not only maintain the overall framework of the exam unchanged, but also effectively guide both teaching parties to focus on the cultivation of cultural understanding ability.

c. Second classroom bonus mechanism

To build a cross-cultural competence development system that integrates in class and out of class activities, it is recommended to establish a comprehensive second classroom incentive mechanism. The

specific implementation of the "dual track system" bonus point scheme: on the one hand, for students who actually participate in international exchange activities (such as Model United Nations conferences, international student forums, foreign-related volunteer services, etc.), an additional 5% bonus point will be given to the overall course evaluation after review; On the other hand, students who have completed designated MOOC cross-cultural courses (such as "Intercultural Communication" at the University of Michigan or "Comparison of Chinese and Western Cultures" at Tsinghua University) and passed the assessment will be awarded a school level certification certificate and given 3% course bonus points. This incentive mechanism can not only significantly enhance students' participation enthusiasm through quantitative bonus points, but also adapt to the personalized development needs of different students with flexible recognition standards.

5. Conclusion

Under the background of globalization and the deepening development of the "the Belt and Road" initiative, it has become an important mission of college English teaching to cultivate high-quality talents with cross-cultural communication skills. The cultivation of cross-cultural competence can not only enhance students' sense of identity in cultural knowledge, but also stimulate their sensitivity to other cultures, as well as their awareness of openness and inclusiveness. This study systematically analyzes the core dimensions of intercultural communication competence, reveals prominent issues in the cultivation of cultural competence in current university English teaching, and proposes practical optimization paths, providing theoretical basis and practical reference for the reform of university English teaching.

In response to the problems in cross-cultural communication, this study proposes an innovative path of "gradual reform": in terms of curriculum system, an embedded teaching mode is adopted, and cultural perspective is added and supporting case readers are developed to achieve the organic integration of cultural teaching and language teaching; In terms of teaching methods, promote the application of case teaching and digital resources to enhance the practicality and timeliness of cultural teaching; In terms of evaluation system, we will establish a diversified evaluation mechanism, strengthen process evaluation, optimize exam question types, and establish a second classroom incentive mechanism to comprehensively promote the cultivation of cross-cultural competence.

The reform path proposed in this study not only fully considers the actual conditions of current university English teaching and has high operability, but also emphasizes the improvement of the evaluation system rather than subversion, which is conducive to the smooth progress of the reform. In addition, emphasis is placed on the linkage between in class and out of class activities, providing personalized development opportunities for students at different levels. The cultivation of cross-cultural competence in college English teaching is a systematic project that requires the joint efforts of educational administrators, teachers, and students. Only by integrating cultural awareness throughout the entire teaching process can we truly cultivate new era talents with global competence and provide

talent support for the country's opening-up strategy.

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