

Original Paper

A Directional-Activation Pathway to Integrating Traditional Chinese Culture into College English Teaching

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Abstract

Driven by the national strategy of “Chinese culture going global”, foreign language education is increasingly called upon to balance the cultivation of linguistic skills with the fostering of Chinese cultural awareness. Informed by the problem-driven concept of culture-extended teaching, this paper, with the cultural content embedded in the New Horizon College English textbooks as the instructional framework, designs pedagogical activities that facilitate the two-way activation of English language competence cultivation and the inheritance and innovation of Chinese culture, and this study is hoped to provide a referential path for the construction of Chinese cultural awareness in college foreign language education.

Keywords

college English teaching, traditional Chinese culture, two-way activation

1. Introduction

Language and culture are inextricably intertwined because language is the carrier of culture and culture is disseminated through language; in this sense, college English teaching is essentially a form of intercultural education. As a key component of undergraduate general education, college English course boasts wide student coverage and a long instructional cycle, making it an ideal platform for systematically cultivating college students' Chinese cultural awareness and identity. However, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach has long prevailed in college English, which to some extent turned English class into a medium for students to learn about foreign cultures and gave rise to the phenomenon of Chinese cultural aphasia. This has led to a central concern in foreign language academia: how to move beyond the “one-way infusion” of English language and culture and foster a dynamic process of interaction, interpretation, and symbiosis between English and Chinese cultures within college English curricula.

2. Literature Review

Against the backdrop of deepening cultural confidence and the national strategy of telling China's story well, the demands for intercultural communication in the global context have become increasingly prominent. Infusing Chinese cultural awareness education into college English courses has thus become a critical imperative to meet these evolving demands and to redress the prevalent issue of "Chinese cultural aphasia" proposed by Cong Cong (2000). Scholars have carried out multi-dimensional investigations around this research theme. Duan and Xu (2026), as well as Wang and He (2025), discussed how to embed diverse outstanding traditional Chinese cultural contents into vocabulary learning, translation exercises and cross-cultural teaching sessions. Sun (2016) proposed a framework for competence reconstruction, arguing that college English classes ought to cultivate students' ability to introduce Chinese cultural heritage to foreign readers and listeners in proper English. On the basis of the prior research, Zhou (2023) further enriched relevant studies with a cross-cultural value comparison framework. This method encourages instructors to arrange Sino-Western cultural comparison activities in class, allowing learners to grasp the modern implications embedded in ancient Chinese ideological traditions and achieve the organic combination of language training and value education. Drawing on all the above theoretical outcomes, contemporary researchers tend to adopt empirical research means such as action research, case analysis and corpus statistics. These methods help turn abstract macro ideas of cultural teaching into operable and testable classroom activities, and further construct a two-way activation route that can improve learners' language skills and cultural cognition at the same time.

3. Two-Way Activation

Existing academic studies widely adopt the word "integration" to describe how traditional Chinese cultural cultivation connects with English ability training within college English courses. Nevertheless, this expression carries an underlying bias: it regards cultural learning as secondary to language skill training. Such wording cannot reflect the mutually promotional bond between improving learners' English ability and shaping their awareness of Chinese culture. In real teaching scenarios, this biased mindset creates a supplementary cultural teaching mode. Under this mode, cultural materials are simply attached to language lessons instead of being fused into teaching design. The defect of this model can be seen in three key links: textbook compilation, student evaluation and teachers' professional growth. All three segments prioritize learners' language performance yet ignore the balanced development of linguistic ability, cultural identity and cross-cultural communication skills.

Duan (2014) examined the flaws embedded in college English curricula of general universities and highlighted the urgency of curriculum reforms centered on cultural education. Such reform ideas are highly valuable because communicative language teaching (CLT) has long been the mainstream teaching method for domestic college English. CLT encourages learners to learn and absorb cultural elements from English-speaking countries. Although this method helps students get access to overseas cultures efficiently, it also leads to the well-known problem of "Chinese cultural aphasia". The concept of two-

way activation emerges as academia rethinks the drawbacks of one-sided foreign language teaching and the dilemma of cultural aphasia. Many researchers hold that foreign language teaching ought to build interactive, mutually explanatory and coexistent relations between local culture and the culture of target languages. Based on theories such as intercultural communication, sociocultural studies and ecological affordance, academics have continuously worked out operable ways to embed Chinese cultural elements into college foreign language courses. To address the long-term one-way input of foreign cultural content in college English classrooms, researchers propose the two-way activation path as an optimized teaching solution. Its core logic is to leverage students' familiarity and deep recognition of native culture to facilitate foreign language learning. This model enables learners to make simultaneous progress in English skills and cross-cultural communication competence.

The framework consists of two closely connected dimensions. The first is inward activation: students absorb and interpret foreign cultural knowledge through English learning activities. The second is outward activation: learners master fluent and authentic English expressions to spread excellent traditional Chinese culture. The two dimensions do not operate in separate stages; instead, they continuously promote and reinforce each other.

For one thing, cultural endows language learning with profound value and inner logic. It supplies learners with value guidance, intellectual nourishment and clear cultural identity. Once traditional Chinese culture becomes the core learning content in English classrooms, language training will no longer be a mechanical drill of linguistic knowledge, but a real cross-cultural dialogue. For another, college English classes provide a convenient platform for learners to reinterpret traditional Chinese culture from a contemporary perspective and introduce such cultural wealth to global audiences with simple and smooth English expressions. This mechanism ensures that China's fine cultural inheritance can maintain vitality and deliver meaningful value to young generations.

4. Two-Way Activation Teaching Design

New Horizon College English (NHCE, 4th ed.), an excellent college English textbook published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, is an excellent college English textbook published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, is widely adopted by universities across China. Guided by the principle of value-oriented education, the textbook series incorporates contents concerning China's economic, social and cultural achievements for Chinese cultural education in the sections of *Stories of China* and English-Chinese Translation Tasks. Moreover, UCampus, the supporting digital learning platform, provides supplementary cultural materials for students and facilitates in-depth cultural instruction for teachers.

4.1 Rationale of Instructional Design

New Horizon College English (4th Ed.) is a mainstream textbook applied in numerous university English classrooms nationwide. This teaching material gains recognition for its abundant and clearly organized Chinese cultural materials, yet several obvious flaws still exist in its content layout. The core Text A of

each unit mainly revolves around cultural stories from English-speaking countries, with only scattered and insufficient content touching upon Chinese cultural themes. Relevant Chinese cultural resources are separately arranged in the independent column “Stories of China”, failing to blend organically with the main teaching units. Such layout separates Chinese and Western cultural narratives without unified thematic frameworks, creating an obvious gap between students’ language training and systematic learning of local culture. Simply put, the textbook only presents basic information about Chinese culture, but provides no practical guidance for teachers to organize balanced cross-cultural comparison and equal intercultural communication activities. Besides, the exercise items matched with core texts only involve reading comprehension questions, which just examine students’ capability to extract literal facts from passages. To tackle these deficiencies, instructors need to create high-level learning tasks including cross-cultural contrast analysis, critical thinking practice and cultural transformation training. Such requirements raise higher standards for teachers’ cultural awareness, flexible teaching adjustment and cross-cultural interpretation competence. All the practical obstacles observed in textbook-based teaching serve as the research origin of this teaching design.

To build an effective teaching plan based on the two-way activation theory, teachers need to learn about the cultural connotations in the textbook materials in depth, select reasonable angles for comparing Chinese and Western cultures, and add thematic Chinese cultural materials that align with the main topics of each unit. Classroom activities should be organised in a logical sequence so that the inherent logic of two-way activation can be carried through at all times during teaching. The level of transformation by teachers of the cultural resources into effective teaching materials directly affects the quality of interactive and generative teaching activities. Goal-oriented tasks can be set as the assessment goals. The above tasks can determine students’ progress in English and how well they have learned from and innovated traditional Chinese culture; therefore, they will provide all-round references for evaluating the actual teaching results of the two-way activation framework.

4.2 Two-Way Activation Instructional Design

This instructional design centers on the cultural connotations embedded in Text A, *An Impressive English Lesson* from NHCE (Book 2). It related to grammar education act as the core analysis object in this case design. Before designing specific classroom links, teachers need to prepare matching Chinese cultural materials with officially recognized English translations, which can help students carry out side-by-side analysis of Chinese and Western educational logic.

Such class arrangements aim to let students truly recognize the value of local cultural heritage, and help them master accurate English expressions to share cultural viewpoints. Apart from in-class discussion links, reflective writing tasks are also set within teaching sessions. These written assignments train students to think critically and consolidate their sense of cultural belonging. The ultimate target of this whole set of teaching activities is to cultivate capable cross-cultural communicators, who can spread authentic Chinese stories to overseas readers and listeners with precise, fluent English expressions.

The selected Text A records a father’s real thinking after observing his child’s English learning process.

At the beginning of the text, the father jokes that he is “a slave to grammar rules”, an evaluation that his son strongly rejects. This trivial daily conflict further reflects two completely different generational attitudes toward language education. The father insists on rigorous grammar rules and precise word choices, yet his son prefers loose, casual expressions in daily communication. From the father’s perspective, such random language use reflects the general decline of young people’s mastery of standardized language. Several typical paragraphs illustrating this core contradiction are listed as follows: *(As the father and his son set out on their trip, they noticed a bird in jerky flight, and this is the conversation between the father and his son.)*

Son: It’s flying so unsteady.

Father: My son, how is the bird flying?

Son: What’s wrong? Did I say anything incorrectly?

Father: Great! You said incorrectly instead of incorrect. We use adverbs to describe verbs. Therefore, it’s flying sounds steadily but not sounds steady.

Son: What is an adverb?

Father: It’s a word that tells you something about a verb. (Zheng, 2023, p. 5)

According to the thinking of two-way activation, the three loose progressive links of the entire teaching schedule are preparation before class, interactive learning in class, and extended practice after class.

Before the regular class, the teacher will have students determine the main ideas of the reading materials. The whole article shows that many Western teachers are worried about language teaching now. The problems are lack of grammar instruction, limited expression scope and declining language quality over time. The above preliminary text analysis will provide a good foundation for teachers to introduce traditional Chinese ideas on language learning.

When class officially starts, all interactive activities will be aimed at expanding students’ knowledge of Chinese educational culture. Teachers gradually give a number of leading questions at different times to guide students to discover the fundamental cultural logic of lines themselves. A number of cross-cultural interactive activities will let the students learn about educational ideas in China and abroad through experience, rather than through reading. Through all kinds of classroom activities, the students will be able to learn various ways of studying classical Chinese.

After the in-class study, additional homework will be given by the teacher. Learners should write reflections on the theme of culture. The above written exercises can help students organise the cultural knowledge they have learned in this unit and apply it to improve their practical cross-cultural communication skills in daily life outside of school.

(1) Concept Activation

First, help the students determine the main topic of the text in this section: people’s various attitudes towards learning Chinese. Learners will sort out the two opposing educational views in the article. One is of the opinion that a good foundation of grammar and vocabulary is necessary for fluent speech. The other views are that grammar teaching is dull and fails to interest the students. To promote deeper thinking

among students, the teacher presents a main question: "What is the author's attitude?", and then, one by one, adds related questions to guide the students to find all the sides and balances of the author's view. Grammar and vocabulary learning are necessary, but there should also be some freedom in learning. He thinks that particular questions can arouse children's interest in learning and promote good study habits. At the end of this session, a main research question has arisen: how can language teachers balance standardized language training and students' learning motivation?

(2) Cross-Cultural Comparison

After clarifying the internal educational contradictions in the text, teachers switch to cross-cultural comparisons in the class discussion and answer a second round of questions. The teacher gives a leading question for group discussion: "The author advocates an inquiry-based approach that encourages children to raise their own questions. Do similar pedagogical ideas exist in traditional Chinese culture?" This question can help students connect the educational ideas of old China with the analysis of texts. Based on the comparison above, the teachers prepare slides with authoritative English translations of classic Chinese educational maxims. The above translated sentences are used to convey the traditional Chinese educational ideas in English. All of the comparative discussion activities are based on the analysis framework in Table 1, and students work in groups to compare Chinese and Western educational ideas. With the above division of labour, it is clear that the inquiry-based grammar teaching proposed by the Western writer has a long history in systematic traditional Chinese educational theories. Students can now learn that the fundamental ideas of education are the same in all parts of the world, and rich theoretical materials for student-centered teaching can be drawn from traditional Chinese culture.

Table 1. Comparison of Inquiry-Based Teaching: China vs. the West

Dimension	Chinese Perspective	Western Perspective	Parallels
Timing of Enlightenment	"I do not open up the truth to one who is not eager to get knowledge, nor help out any one who is not anxious to explain himself"	Father asks "How is the bird flying?" and waits until son grows confused before clarifying	Both reject premature indoctrination; both wait for students to develop doubts before guiding
Critical Thinking	"When I have presented one corner of a subject to any one, and he cannot from it learn the other three, I do not repeat my lesson"	Father uses questions to guide reasoning, not rote memorization or repetitive correction	Both prioritize independent thinking; reject memorization and passive learning
Learning Attitude	"They who know it are not equal to they who love it; they who love it are notequal to they who delight in it"	Father transforms son from passive, frustrated learner into active, curious inquirer	Both value intrinsic motivation; advocate shift from passive reception to active exploration

(3) Extended Cross-Cultural Dialogue

Expand the scope of Sino-Western educational comparison and do not focus only on the problem of grammar teaching. Teachers lead students to compare the full ideological systems of language learning in China and in the West. Two linked guiding questions are posed in turn to prompt learners to think comparatively. The first question is: "Besides teaching methods, do China and the West have different views on the final goals of language learning?" This question will make students consider the basic differences in foreign language learning motivation between the two cultures. The second guiding question reduces the scope of the group discussion. The author seeks precise, brief and purposeful expression in writing and is influenced by Western instrumental pragmatics. The only purpose of language in this school is to communicate effectively. Based on the above, teachers can put forward another reflective question: "How does traditional Chinese culture view language learning?" and have students explore various cultural perspectives. The teacher will present a 3D analysis system of good small-group discussions. The three dimensions are the basic state of language in each cultural system (core positioning), the goals that people hope to achieve in the practice of language learning (value pursuit), and the final purposes of language education (ultimate objectives). PPT materials can be supplemented with standard English translations of ancient Chinese educational quotes according to the above framework (see Table 2). With the above comparative materials, students can carry out focused cross-cultural exchanges and find similarities and differences in the language-learning philosophies of China and the West.

Table 2. Comparison of Philosophies of Language Learning: China vs. the West

Dimension	Chinese Perspective	Western Perspective	Contrast
Core Positioning	Language serves as a vehicle for self-cultivation	Language functions as a communication tool	Humanistic nature vs. instrumental nature
Value Pursuit	“Elegant rhetoric embodies sincerity; words without refinement cannot travel far” Literacy lays the groundwork for further classical learning	Pursuit of accurate, efficient and functional communication centered on pragmatic interaction	Sincerity, aesthetic refinement and self-improvement vs. utility and task fulfillment
Ultimate Goal	Language learning facilitates moral self-perfection and cultural inheritance, shaping virtuous individuals	Language serves daily communication, problem-solving and expressive proficiency	Cultivating integrity vs. accomplishing practical tasks

(4) Reflective Productive Output

Following the comparative exploration of Sino-Western philosophies of language learning, teachers assign a post-class writing task titled *My Philosophy of Language Learning*, requiring a 200-word short essay that addresses three guiding questions:

1. What is your attitude toward grammar learning—resistance, acceptance, or enthusiasm?
2. What insights have you gained from the author's inquiry-based teaching approach and Confucius' maxim, "*Never enlighten a student until he is perplexed*"—and how does this relate to the Chinese philosophical view of language learning discussed in class?
3. Beyond cross-cultural communication, what deeper personal significance does learning English hold for you, particularly in light of the contrasting Western instrumental view of language?

After teachers finish scoring all essays, targeted feedback will be provided. Students need to revise their compositions according to feedback suggestions. Learners then rewrite revised articles into simple dialogue scripts for in-class oral sharing. This link lowers barriers for natural oral expression and lets students prepare for real peer communication. Group sharing activities themed *My Philosophy of Language Learning* will be held afterwards. Every student needs to share personal ideas, and integrate knowledge learned from the previous three teaching links into their speeches. Such group discussion turns individual written thinking into collective oral exchange. Students can re-examine their own educational viewpoints, comparing personal thoughts with classmates' opinions and the theoretical frameworks learned in class. Students cycle through writing, revision, script reorganization and group sharing. In this repeated process, they slowly absorb the cross-cultural comparison framework and form their own objective, complete views on language learning.

The above analysis sorts out the core logic of this teaching design. To realize effective two-way integration of outstanding traditional Chinese culture and college English teaching, teachers must pick appropriate cultural entry points for each unit. Teachers need to accumulate sufficient reserves of Chinese cultural knowledge, and improve their ability to output cultural content in cross-cultural classrooms. Reading bilingual versions of Chinese classic works is an effective way for teachers to achieve this self-improvement goal. Teachers can build shared cultural resource libraries alone or with other teaching colleagues. These libraries include classified vocabulary lists, short micro-video clips and related reading texts, enriching usable classroom teaching resources. Teachers also need to keep designing and adjusting cultural-themed output tasks, making sure these tasks match linguistic knowledge taught in textbooks. Besides, regular in-class quizzes can add questions related to Chinese cultural knowledge, and cultural-related test items can take up a fixed proportion of final examination scores. Cultural content is formally included in course evaluation standards. Such rules push students to attach importance to learning and mastering traditional Chinese culture. This closed-loop teaching and evaluation mode strengthens students' willingness to learn cultural knowledge, and raises overall classroom participation.

5. Conclusion

Taking the instruction of Text A, “An Impressive English Lesson” (Unit 1, Book 2 of the NHCE), as a point of departure, this teaching design implements two-way integration between text-based language instruction and Chinese cultural content teaching. The whole teaching path contains three progressive links: excavating cultural themes hidden in core texts, carrying out extended Sino-Western cross-cultural comparison, and cultivating students’ dialectical cultural output ability through after-class reflective practice. The whole teaching activity starts with teacher-led text analysis. Students first find out grammar teaching contradictions reflected in the reading material, which acts as a natural entry point for follow-up cultural discussion. Teachers then introduce ancient Chinese educational ideas as a new way of thinking, have students discuss and explore traditional Chinese educational views together, etc. Next, we will systematically compare the concepts of Chinese and Western language learning in class. In the final teaching link, students will use all the knowledge they have learned in class to write some reflective pieces and practice cross-cultural expression. Students will receive all-around language training during the entire course, such as topic introduction and summary, comparison and contrast, logical thinking, etc. Teachers will present some famous Chinese educational aphorisms and their standard English translations in the cross-cultural discussion period. Such cultural resources can help learners deepen their cultural knowledge and learn some basic translation skills. The teaching plan, in terms of cultural education, will broaden the area of students’ learning by cultivating analytical thinking about Chinese culture. It does not propose that the traditional Chinese idea of language education is superior to the Western one. Rather, it can enable learners to know that the ancient cultural wisdom offers some good ways to deal with various problems in modern education. Through the above steps of learning, students will be able to establish a sense of cultural identity.

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