

Original Paper

Restructuring the Chinese Language Teaching Model for International Students in China: A 5C Standards Perspective

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Abstract

This study employs the American World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (commonly referred to as the 5C Standards) as its theoretical framework to systematically reconstruct the Chinese language teaching model for international students in China. Addressing structural challenges inherent in traditional models, such as emphasizing knowledge acquisition over competence development and prioritizing classroom instruction over community engagement, the research undertakes a comprehensive reconstruction across four dimensions: teaching objectives, content, methodologies, and assessment. The new model establishes a goal system centered on the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence, develops thematic teaching content integrating language, culture, and communication, designs instructional approaches based on real-world tasks and community exploration, and builds a diversified and comprehensive assessment system. By fully leveraging the immersive learning environment of international students in China, this model promotes a shift in teaching from a language knowledge-oriented approach to a learner competence-oriented paradigm, thereby offering both theoretical foundations and practical pathways for improving the quality of international Chinese education.

Keywords

5C Standards, International Students in China, Chinese Language Teaching, Intercultural Communicative Competence

Introduction

With the continual advancement of globalization and the steady expansion of international educational cooperation, the scale of international student education in China has been continuously increasing. In this context, international Chinese education is experiencing a significant demand for transition—from

“expanding scale” to “improving quality and efficiency.” The traditional Chinese language teaching model, which is centered on linguistic structures and dominated by teacher-led instruction, is no longer sufficient to meet the real needs of international students for deep communication and cross-cultural adaptation in the Chinese socio-cultural environment. There is an urgent need to introduce more mature and effective pedagogical concepts to guide reform. The “5C Standards” (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities), proposed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), are a key achievement in the field of international language education. These standards emphasize the communicative, cultural, and social aspects of language learning, providing a highly valuable theoretical framework for reconstructing the Chinese teaching model for international students in China.

Although the 5C Standards have been widely applied in international language education since their introduction, and related exploration and preliminary practices have gradually emerged in Chinese scholarship—such as the investigation of specific methods for teaching idioms in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (Huang, 2023), cultural teaching principles based on the 5C Standards in Chinese classrooms (Liu & Luo, 2016), and lesson designs rooted in the 5C framework (Lü, 2024; Zhu, 2024)—most existing research remains focused on partial adjustments to particular lesson types or instructional segments. There is still a lack of studies that systematically construct a comprehensive Chinese teaching model for international students with the 5C Standards at its core. Meanwhile, despite considerable achievements in research on Chinese teaching models for international students in China, notable limitations remain in the setting of learning objectives, the integration of cultural depth, and the utilization of community resources.

Therefore, this study aims to systematically address these research gaps by adopting the 5C Standards as its theoretical perspective and attempting to construct a new Chinese language teaching model that deeply integrates these core concepts, specifically geared towards the immersive learning environments of international students in China. This research employs methods including literature review, comparative analysis, and theoretical construction. It first analyzes the main problems in current teaching models, then explains the theoretical foundations and pedagogical implications of the 5C Standards, and finally, systematically designs a new model across four dimensions: objectives, content, methods, and assessment—further proposing practical implementation pathways. The innovation of this study lies in the systematic and holistic application of the 5C Standards to the realm of Chinese language teaching for international students in China, emphasizing the integration of theory and context. This research seeks to provide both theoretical insights and practical guidance for enhancing the quality of international Chinese education and for fostering the development of international students’ intercultural communicative competence.

1. Theoretical Foundations of the Study

1.1 Core Connotations and Pedagogical Implications of the 5C Standards

The “5C Standards,” proposed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), construct a comprehensive framework for modern language education. At their core, these standards shift the focus of language learning from mere structural mastery to the development of comprehensive communicative and cultural competence (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project. World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages(Fourth Edition), 2015). The 5C Standards encompass five interrelated dimensions, each offering profound pedagogical implications for Chinese language teaching for international students in China.

Communication functions as the fundamental concept and includes three modes: Interpersonal, Interpretive, and Presentational. It underscores bidirectional interaction in authentic communication, interpreting multimodal materials, and organized expression. The implication for Chinese language instruction lies in moving beyond pattern drills to create task-based scenarios involving genuine information exchange. Cultures requires deep exploration at the levels of cultural practices and cultural perspectives (Zou, T. T., & Zhou, Z. L., 2013), guiding international students to understand underlying perspectives through surface-level practices, thereby fostering genuine intercultural understanding (Liu & Luo, 2016). Connections emphasizes that language serves as a bridge to knowledge in other disciplines, suggesting that instructional content should connect with students’ academic interests or current social topics in China. Comparisons calls for the development of deep insights through linguistic and cultural comparisons, requiring instructors to guide students in contrasting their native languages with Chinese as well as their home cultures with Chinese culture. Communities encourages the extension of language use into diverse on- and off-campus communities, revealing that instruction should fully leverage the immersive environment by seamlessly integrating classroom learning with social practice.

1.2 Theory of Teaching Models

A teaching model, established under the guidance of certain pedagogical philosophies or theories, refers to a relatively stable yet concise structural framework of teaching activities and concrete operational procedures formed to achieve specific instructional objectives and content (Joyce & Weil, 2014). A complete teaching model typically consists of four core components: teaching objectives (which direct the expected outcomes of instruction), teaching content (the body of knowledge and experience underlying instruction), teaching methods/processes (the steps, strategies, and patterns of teacher-student interaction employed to achieve the objectives), and assessment (the measurement and evaluation of instructional effectiveness and student learning outcomes).

This study employs these four principal components as the foundational analytical framework for reconstructing the teaching model. More specifically, it systematically redefines the system of instructional objectives for Chinese teaching to international students in China based on the core concepts of the 5C Standards; reconstructs multidimensional teaching content integrating language,

culture, and communication; designs instructional processes and methods centered on authentic tasks and community interaction; and establishes a diversified assessment system aligned with and supportive of the development of process-based and competency-based outcomes. This systematic reconstruction aims to break down traditional fragmentation between model components, forming an integrated whole in which the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence serves as the core, and all components function in synergy.

2. Analysis of the Current Situation and Problems in Chinese Language Teaching Models for International Students in China

2.1 Main Characteristics of the Traditional Teaching Model

At present, the teaching of Chinese to international students in China still largely adopts a traditional teaching model. This model is marked by two main characteristics: First, in terms of content organization, the “structure-function” approach serves as its backbone, with systematic instruction focused on language knowledge and a strong emphasis on discrete training and mastery of linguistic elements such as phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar. However, there is insufficient attention to the cultivation of students’ ability to use the language comprehensively in authentic communicative contexts. Second, classroom implementation reveals a pronounced “teacher-centered” and “textbook-centered” orientation. Classroom activities are predominantly characterized by teacher explanation, student repetition, and imitation, with textbooks serving as virtually the sole source of instructional content. This leads to a passive mode of knowledge acquisition, where students’ individual needs, learning styles, and communicative motivation are insufficiently recognized or stimulated. While this model contributed positively to the rapid accumulation of foundational language knowledge during certain historical periods, it is now inadequate in meeting the evolving competency requirements for intercultural communicators in the current era.

2.2 Problems of the Traditional Model from the Perspective of the 5C Standards

Using the 5C Standards as a lens, we can systematically identify a range of deep-seated issues within the traditional model. At the level of Communication, there is a pronounced deficiency. Teaching heavily prioritizes “Presentational” language forms, while neglecting the “Interpersonal” construction of meaning through interaction. Classroom activities are dominated by scripted dialogues, lacking authentic communicative tasks that require dealing with uncertainty. As a result, students, although equipped with extensive language knowledge, often struggle to communicate effectively in real-life situations.

At the level of Cultures, instruction tends to lack depth. Cultural content is often reduced to isolated cultural facts (such as festivals or cuisine), which are presented as ancillary to language instruction, without in-depth exploration of the underlying cultural perspectives. There is also a noticeable absence of instructional design that enables learners to achieve deep cultural understanding through experience and reflection (Zou, T. T., & Zhou, Z. L., 2013).

In terms of Connections, there is a notable disconnect. The learning of Chinese is severely detached from international students' disciplinary fields (such as engineering, medicine, or business) and personal interests. Language is confined within an isolated system and fails to serve as a tool for students to explore academic knowledge or developments in Chinese society, which in turn weakens both their intrinsic motivation and the practical value of language learning.

For Comparisons, activities are sporadic and lack systematic or conscious guidance. There is minimal structured comparison between students' native languages and Chinese, or between their home cultures and Chinese culture. This oversight leads to missed opportunities for leveraging their bilingual and bicultural backgrounds to foster multiple perspectives and critical thinking.

At the level of Communities, there are significant limitations in the teaching environment. Learning activities are highly concentrated within the closed setting of the classroom, failing to take full advantage of the immersive language environment available to international students in China. There is little guidance directing students into broader "Chinese-speaking communities" (such as on campus or in the city) for practical engagement, thereby missing the natural advantages of learning Chinese in China and rendering these advantages underutilized.

2.3 Analysis of the Underlying Causes

The formation of the aforementioned problems stems from multiple deep-rooted factors. First is the inertia of teaching beliefs. Many practitioners in the field, having themselves been trained under traditional models, face significant challenges in transforming their own pedagogical concepts and methodologies. Second is the rigidity inherent in textbook design. The prevailing logic underlying the compilation of mainstream textbooks and the design of classroom activities continues to follow the "structure-function" approach, failing to provide adequate content support for the practical application of the 5C Standards.

Third, and most critically, the assessment system itself remains overly simplistic. Current assessment practices predominantly rely on standardized language proficiency tests (such as the HSK), and the resulting washback effect compels teaching to revert to the pursuit of measurable language knowledge. This makes it difficult to incorporate the assessment of communicative competence, cultural understanding, and community engagement into the mainstream evaluation system. These three factors are interwoven and together constitute a structural barrier that impedes the transformation of teaching models.

3. Constructing a New Chinese Language Teaching Model for International Students in China Based on the 5C Standards

3.1 Guiding Philosophy and Overall Objectives of the New Model

In response to the core issues present in current teaching models, the new model constructed in this study aims to explore effective pathways for shifting the focus of Chinese language teaching for international students in China from a traditional "language knowledge-oriented" approach to one that

is “oriented toward comprehensive learner competence.” This transformation signifies that the starting point and ultimate goal of teaching are no longer the systematic transmission of linguistic structures in themselves, but rather the learner’s ability to use the language effectively and appropriately for communication, thinking, and action in authentic, diverse, intercultural contexts.

The overall objective of the new model is to fully leverage the immersive learning environment of international students in China, cultivating them into autonomous, reflective lifelong learners with advanced intercultural communicative competence who are able to proactively identify and solve problems using Chinese in real-world Chinese-speaking communities on and off campus. This objective directly addresses the core requirements for talent in the era of globalization and ensures that the results of Chinese language learning can be transformed into a solid foundation for students’ academic development, personal growth, and future career competitiveness.

3.2 Reconstruction of the Model’s Objective System

The new model abandons vague and generalized descriptions of competence, instead operationalizing the 5C Standards into a clearly defined, observable, and assessable multi-tiered objective system, providing direct guidance for instructional design and assessment.

Communication Objectives: Students are able to negotiate meaning, express feelings and viewpoints on familiar topics in interpersonal exchanges; understand main ideas and underlying intentions in diverse media (such as announcements, short videos, brief news items); and give organized oral presentations or written statements on particular topics.

Cultures Objectives: Students are able to describe and demonstrate common Chinese cultural practices (such as table manners, gift-giving customs); under teacher guidance, conduct preliminary analyses of the underlying perspectives reflected in specific cultural practices (e.g., “guanxi,” “face”); contrast cultural differences and display basic cultural adaptation skills (Liu & Luo, 2016).

Connections Objectives: Students are able to use Chinese to access information relevant to their academic majors or personal interests; collect, organize, and report on basic information concerning a Chinese socio-cultural phenomenon (e.g., mobile payments, the sharing economy).

Comparisons Objectives: Students are able to identify and illustrate at least one significant grammatical or pragmatic difference between Chinese and their native language; compare and reflect on similarities and differences between their home culture and Chinese culture on a specific cultural topic (e.g., education styles, family values).

Communities Objectives: Students are able to independently complete at least one communicative task in a real-life setting outside the classroom (such as in a dining hall, supermarket, or at a package pick-up point); and participate in at least one organized cultural exchange activity on or off campus.

3.3 Reconstruction of Teaching Content in the New Model

To achieve the above objectives, teaching content must break the artificial separation between “language” and “culture,” promoting deep integration of language, culture, and communication, and making extensive use of authentic materials. The new model advocates for a theme-based, modular

content system, with each module revolving around themes that integrate language knowledge, cultural knowledge, and communicative skills.

For example:

Module 1: Campus Life (Themes: registration, course selection, joining student clubs, dormitory relationships). Authentic materials include campus maps, course schedules, club recruitment posters, and student conduct regulations.

Module 2: Urban Exploration (Themes: transportation, shopping, dining, seeking medical care). Authentic materials include subway maps, online shopping interfaces, restaurant menus, pharmaceutical instructions, etc.

Module 3: Social Hot Topics in China (Themes: environmental protection, technology, health). Authentic materials include science videos from short video platforms, discussions of trending topics on social media, brief news reports, etc.

Each module is driven by a core “Driving Question.” For instance, the “Urban Exploration” module might pose: “How can you plan a day’s itinerary and efficiently use various tools to complete a cultural experience in Shanghai?” In this way, language learning becomes a means to complete projects and solve problems, rather than an end in itself.

3.4 Reconstruction of Teaching Methods and Pathways in the New Model

Teaching methods are the pathway to achieving the objectives set by the 5C Standards. The new model strongly advocates for Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Project-Based Learning (PBL), and community-based inquiry, emphasizing “learning by doing.”

The following is a sample instructional activity integrating the 5C Standards:

Task Title: “Cross-Cultural Shopping Experience: From Online Selection to Offline Returns”

Task Objective: Small groups cooperate to experience the complete process of shopping (and possibly returning an item) on a Chinese e-commerce platform (such as Taobao), ultimately submitting an experiential report (either in written or video form).

Task Content:

Communication: Internal group negotiations (interpersonal); reading product information, user reviews, chatting with customer service (interpretive); composing a shopping experience report (presentational).

Cultures: Investigation of the consumer rights embodied in the “seven-day unconditional return” policy; comparisons of return policies between Chinese and foreign e-commerce platforms.

Connections: Integration with economics (consumer behavior) and information technology (app usage) knowledge.

Comparisons: Compare the shopping process, payment methods, and after-sales service in students’ home countries and in China.

Communities: The task is completed entirely within real online communities and offline logistics sites, representing a true “beyond the classroom” learning experience.

Such complex, open-ended tasks weave the 5C Standards seamlessly together, allowing learners to

comprehensively practice all skills and achieve deep, meaningful learning.

3.5 Reconstruction of the Assessment System in the New Model

To align with the new model, it is essential to establish a diversified assessment system that breaks the dominance of test scores as the primary evaluation criterion. This system emphasizes a combination of formative and summative assessment, integrating both quantitative and qualitative measures.

Portfolio Assessment: Students compile all learning products over a certain period, including assignments, project plans, reports, reflective journals, photos of activities, video projects, etc., providing a comprehensive record of their learning process and holistic competence development.

Performance Assessment: Students are directly evaluated on their performance in authentic or simulated tasks such as the “shopping experience,” with detailed rubrics used to assess communication strategies, cultural understanding, and task completion across multiple dimensions.

Self and Peer Assessment: Students are guided to reflect on their own learning processes and strategies, and to appreciate and evaluate the work of their peers, fostering metacognitive skills and a spirit of collaboration.

Summative Assessment: At the end of the term, a portion of standardized tests may be retained (accounting for roughly 30–40%) to check mastery of language knowledge, but greater weight is allocated to comprehensive, project-based assessments.

This diversified assessment system not only provides a fuller and more equitable measure of students’ holistic competencies, but also serves as a powerful pedagogical tool—by making evaluation criteria explicit, it drives students’ learning and achieves integration of teaching, learning, and assessment.

4. Implementation Strategies and Recommendations for the New Teaching Model

To ensure the effective implementation of the new Chinese language teaching model for international students in China, which is based on the 5C Standards, it is essential to address both the relevant agents of teaching practice and the supporting environment. This section offers systematic strategies and recommendations across four key dimensions.

4.1 Recommendations for Chinese Language Teachers

Teachers are pivotal to the success of the new model. The primary task is to effect a thorough transformation of teaching philosophy: teachers must transition from knowledge transmitters to creators of learning environments, facilitators of communicative tasks, and promoters of intercultural dialogue. Teachers must develop a deep understanding of the core principles of the 5C Standards, consciously shifting instructional objectives from linguistic structures toward communicative competence and cultural literacy. At the same time, teachers must enhance their own intercultural competence and curriculum design capabilities. This involves deepening their understanding of both Chinese culture and students’ home cultures, strengthening their sensitivity to and ability to address intercultural issues, and—more importantly—developing the ability to design and integrate thematic, task-based curricula and activities. Teachers should be able to creatively employ authentic materials

and design comprehensive learning tasks that interweave multiple “Cs.” Educational institutions should organize systematic teacher workshops and collaborative research activities to support these professional development needs.

4.2 Recommendations for Textbook Development

The development of new instructional materials must decisively abandon grammar-centric paradigms, adopting a model that is both task-driven and theme-guided. In terms of content, textbooks should be rich in authentic and diverse materials, extensively incorporating social media screenshots, news excerpts, public service information, film and television clips, and interview transcripts, thereby ensuring that language input is both genuine and current. Modular textbook structures are recommended, with each module built around a core task (such as “planning an in-depth city walk”), integrating language knowledge, cultural content, communication strategies, and comparative reflection activities. This provides teachers with ready-to-use scaffolding for instructional delivery.

4.3 Recommendations for Instructional Management

Educational management bodies must provide both strategic planning and institutional guarantees. First, the existing assessment and evaluation systems require reform. The weighting of summative written examinations should be reduced, while performance-based assessment and portfolio assessment should be included as part of overall grade evaluation, alongside the establishment of rubrics aligned with the competency objectives of the 5C Standards. Redirecting the guiding influence of assessment is the most powerful lever for prompting both teachers and students to shift toward the new model. Second, interdisciplinary collaboration should be actively encouraged and institutionally guaranteed, breaking down barriers between language teaching and subject-matter instruction. For example, a credit transfer system can be established, encouraging international students to select introductory courses taught in Chinese from other disciplines, thereby creating formal pathways for them to use Chinese as a medium of academic study (“Connections”).

4.4 Recommendations for Technology Integration

Digital technologies offer limitless possibilities for expanding the boundaries of “Community.” Full use should be made of modern information technologies to support teaching, creating integrated online and offline learning spaces. On one hand, language learning apps and virtual reality (VR) technology can be leveraged to simulate authentic communicative scenarios and enable task rehearsal. On the other hand, technology can expand the online space of “Community,” encouraging students to engage with Chinese social media platforms—such as rednote, Weibo, and Bilibili—and follow influencers in their areas of interest. This, in itself, constitutes a deep “Cultures” experience and active “Community” participation. Teachers can design tasks requiring students to collaborate on producing Chinese-language vlogs, publish posts on rednote, or participate in online discussions, thus transforming their digital footprints into valuable learning evidence and key evaluation artifacts.

5. Conclusion and Prospects

This study has examined the necessity and feasibility of reconstructing the Chinese language teaching model for international students in China based on the U.S. World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (5C Standards). The findings indicate that the five core objectives advocated by the 5C Standards—Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities—provide a systematic theoretical framework and practical pathway for addressing the structural challenges currently found in teaching, such as an overemphasis on knowledge at the expense of ability, a focus on classroom learning over community engagement, and the prioritization of language over culture. The model developed in this study centers on the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence and lifelong learner development. Its defining characteristics include a shift from a language-knowledge orientation to a learner-competence orientation, as well as an integrated reconstruction of objectives, content, methods, and assessment into a coordinated whole.

However, this research has primarily focused on theoretical construction and systematic design. The proposed new model has not yet undergone large-scale, long-term empirical validation; its effectiveness and adaptability to diverse instructional contexts therefore remain to be further substantiated by empirical data. Looking ahead, future research may proceed along two main paths: First, rigorous comparative teaching experiments may be conducted, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods to scientifically evaluate the new model's actual impact on students' comprehensive language use, intercultural sensitivity, and learning motivation. Second, more targeted research may explore model variants and refinements for international student groups with diverse cultural backgrounds, varying Chinese language proficiency levels, and different disciplinary fields. Such efforts could help advance the model from a theoretical framework to targeted teaching practices, providing sustained momentum for the enhancement of educational quality for international students in China.

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