

A Study on the Cultivation of Intercultural Competence of English Majors——Take the Construction of the Course "History of Western Civilization" as an Example

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization, cultivating students' intercultural competence has become a crucial mission in foreign language education. As a required course for English majors, "History of Western Civilization" uniquely integrates language, history, and culture to foster intercultural abilities. Based on the framework of reference for intercultural competence teaching in China's foreign language education in university, the pathway is explored to develop intercultural competence among English majors through three dimensions: curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and assessment systems. The course employs comparative studies of Chinese and Western civilizations to help students appreciate cultural similarities and differences while understanding the true meaning of a shared future for humanity. Interactive teaching methods stimulate student engagement and demonstrate the tangible impact of cultural exchanges. Assessment systems centered on critical thinking evaluate students' comprehension, analysis, and research capabilities regarding cultural conflicts and interactions between civilizations.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural competence; "History of Western Civilization"; Teaching content; Teaching methods; Teaching evaluation

1 Introduction

In today's world, intercultural communication and collaboration have become defining characteristics. Against this background, foreign language education in universities must not only develop students' linguistic skills but also prioritize cultivating their intercultural competence. China's Ministry of Education further elaborates in "Guidelines for the Teaching of English Language Majors": "Respect for global cultural diversity; demonstrate intercultural tolerance and critical awareness; acquire fundamental theories and analytical methods of intercultural studies; understand core similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures; interpret and evaluate cultural phenomena, texts, and artifacts; engage in effective intercultural communication; and facilitate meaningful interactions among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds."^[1] It highlights that "intercultural competence" emphasizes respect for multiculturalism, open-mindedness, and the ability to transcend cultural barriers. Currently, "History of Western Civilization" serves as a compulsory course for English majors. The curriculum systematically organizes content based on the historical development of Western civilization, reinforcing language fundamentals while expanding students' cultural horizons, enhancing humanistic literacy, and refining logical thinking abilities. Cultivating intercultural competence. This course uniquely integrates language, history, and cultural studies: Language serves as both the focal point and the medium of expression; History provides the historical context and directional framework for discourse; Culture offers the cultural background and spatial dimensions for communication. It can be said that this curriculum possesses unparalleled advantages in developing intercultural abilities among English majors.

Currently, most universities offer "History of Western Civilization" as a general education optional course, while only a small number of English departments have adopted it as a required course. Research on this curriculum remains relatively limited. Based on the "Intercultural Competence Teaching Framework", this paper explores three dimensions—curriculum content, instructional methods, and assessment systems—to examine how the "History of Western Civilization" course cultivates intercultural competence of English majors.

2 Breakdown of intercultural competence indicators

In 2020, Professor Zhang Hongling and her team from the Intercultural Research Center of Shanghai International Studies University proposed the "4-3-2-1" theoretical framework for intercultural competence development, based on which they developed the "Integrated Model of Intercultural Competence Development for Chinese Students" (IMCSICD). This model, "rooted in China's context and oriented toward the future world, serves students across all educational stages including primary, junior high, senior high, and university levels"^[2]. Upon this framework, the team established a teaching reference framework for intercultural competence. The "Reference Framework for Cultivating Intercultural Competence in Foreign Language Education at University Level" is shown in Table 1:

This framework outlines the specific content and objectives of intercultural competence instruction, providing practical guidance for curriculum design and activity planning. Based on this framework, this study explores pathway to

Table 1 Reference framework for teaching intercultural competence in foreign language education at university level ^[3]

Capacity dimension		University
Phase studying		
Knowledge	Foreign Cultural Knowledge	K-FCK-4 Understand world history, geography, social culture, politics, economy, literature and art; understand the social and cultural phenomena contained or reflected in foreign language texts; extensively and deeply understand the lifestyles, communication styles, ways of thinking, values and other aspects of different cultural groups in the world
	Chinese Cultural Knowledge	K-CCK-4 is familiar with China's history, traditional culture, philosophical thought, and classical works; understands the significant role that contemporary China plays in global political, economic, and technological development and its contributions to global governance; recognizes China's cultural diversity and deeply comprehends the core socialist values.
	General Cultural Knowledge	K-CCK-4 Understand linguistic and cultural diversity and its significance; master theories of intercultural communication, cultural values, and cultural identity; gain a deep understanding of the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind and the common values of all humanity
	Cultural Awareness	A-CA-4 respects cultural differences and actively puts oneself in others shoes; based on understanding China's historical culture and contemporary development, it deepens the recognition of China's cultural identity; it is willing to interact and cooperate with people from different cultures, demonstrating strong empathy.
Attitudes	National Identity	A-NI-4 actively participates in cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries, bravely responds to prejudices, misunderstandings, and doubts about China in international interactions, spreads China's voice, enhances international understanding, and demonstrates patriotism and a sense of mission.
	Global Mindedness	A-GM-4 recognizes the significance of globalization and internationalization in the era, identifies with the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind, and is committed to participating in international cooperation and global governance on behalf of the country
Skills	Intercultural Experiencing	Through extensive exposure to and learning of world cultures, S-IEr-4 will deepen understanding of Chinese and foreign cultures and gradually improve intercultural critical thinking skills. It will be able to describe, compare and analyze the similarities and differences in the ways of thinking and values of different cultural groups in depth in a foreign language.
	Intercultural Dialogue	S-ID-4 Can engage in intercultural dialogue with people from different cultures in foreign languages; when encountering intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts, can analyze problems from the perspective of cultural differences, actively take coping strategies to solve problems, and establish and maintain harmonious relationships
	Intercultural Exploration	Through repeated practice, summary, reflection and evaluation, S-IEI-4 has mastered and can flexibly apply the general principles of intercultural communication in practice; can independently explore unfamiliar cultures, and form a certain awareness and ability of cultural research

cultivate students intercultural competence through three dimensions—Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills—in the “History of Western Civilization”, focusing on three key aspects: instructional content, teaching methods, and assessment approaches.^①

3 Construction measures of the course “history of western civilization”

3.1 Lecture-cognition: presenting the teaching content of cultural inter-reflection

Typically, the course “History of Western Civilization” organizes its content according to the developmental stages of Western history. Within each chapter, historical facts and their significance are presented through themes such as politics, economy, culture, technology, and art. However, students passively absorb information with limited classroom engagement. Cultivating intercultural competence requires mutual understanding between selves and others. Therefore, this course should foster comparative analysis between Chinese and Western civilizations. Through such comparisons, students engage in reflective discussions, recognize cultural similarities and differences, and truly grasp the essence of a shared future for humanity.

For example, in the section on ancient Greek civilization, Athenian democracy is a mandatory topic. However, democracy at that time also had its drawbacks. To help students understand that political systems are not eternal truths, their criteria for judgment are closely tied to the demands of their era. Here, we contrast China’s ancient centralized system with this, as shown in Table 2:

Through the aforementioned comparative teaching, students can better understand the differences between Chinese and Western civilizations, cultivate their intercultural thinking abilities, and develop awareness of comparative research.

^① For the convenience of discussion, all teaching cases in this paper are expressed in Chinese.

Table 2 Comparison between the democratic system of Athens in ancient Greece and the centralized system of ancient China

The Athenian democracy of ancient Greece	The ancient centralized power system of China
Athens stands as the quintessential embodiment of ancient Greek democracy. During Pericles reign, Athenian democracy reached its zenith. The citizens assembly served as the supreme legislative body, open to all adult male citizens who voted on crucial state affairs including military campaigns, peace negotiations, and legal enactments. Additionally, institutions like the jury court were established to safeguard citizens judicial rights.	Since the establishment of the Qin Dynasty, ancient China formed a highly centralized autocratic centralization system. The emperor was the supreme ruler of the state, possessing absolute power in legislative, administrative, military, and other aspects. At the local level, the commandery-county system was implemented, with officials directly appointed by the central government and subject to the emperors orders.
Analysis	
1. Impact on social structure: The centralized system in ancient China helped maintain national unity and social stability, but it also tended to lead to the abuse of power and corruption. Athens democratic system allowed citizens to directly participate in politics, which stimulated civic enthusiasm, yet it was prone to issues such as hasty decision-making and inefficiency.	
2. Impact on Ideology and Culture: The centralized system in ancient China emphasized ideological unity and compliance with the ruling class ideology. On this foundation, Confucianism became the orthodox ideology, exerting profound influence on history. Athens democratic system promoted intellectual freedom and diversified development, which gave rise to thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, influencing various aspects of subsequent culture.	

Moreover, comparing the achievements of different civilizations can guide students to comprehend the true meaning of a community with a shared future for mankind. First, both Athenian democracy and ancient China's centralized governance system aimed to achieve social stability and peoples well-being. The former ensured citizens freedom and equality through direct participation, while the latter maintained social order and stability through unified governance. Second, Athens democratic system and ancient China's centralized governance demonstrated distinct governance approaches and value orientations. This contrast indicates that different civilizations can select appropriate governance models based on their respective eras, cultural contexts, and social conditions. The concept of a community with a shared future for mankind does not demand global uniformity but rather respects diversity and developmental needs, advocating dialogue, exchange, and cooperation among different civilizations.

3.2 Participation-emotion: teaching methods that highlight civilized interaction

The content and nature of the course "History of Western Civilization" dictate that it primarily adopts a lecture-based approach, yet the chronological teaching arrangement and dry historical facts pose certain obstacles to achieving effective classroom instruction. Friedrich Adolf Wilhelm Diesterweg (1790-1866), the renowned German educator, posited: "Teaching itself is not merely about imparting knowledge, nor is it about transmitting comprehensive and systematic information; rather, it is about cultivating and developing"^[4]. Carl Ransom Rogers (1902-1987), a leading figure in humanistic psychology, advocated for meaningful free learning. He categorized learning into two types: "meaningless learning" that occurs above the cognitive level, and "meaningful learning" that integrates emotional, attitudinal, and psychological factors to achieve holistic development. Based on this perspective, the course design emphasizes student participation by reversing the traditional model. It begins with real-world phenomena, guides students through problem-based thinking, encourages hands-on exploration of materials, facilitates sharing and discussions, and fosters understanding of civilization through interaction while experiencing civilizational dynamics. The classroom teaching process is structured as follows:

Teaching chapter: The Enlightenment in Europe in the 18th century

Teaching content: Background of the Enlightenment; main Enlightenment thinkers and their ideas; influence of the Enlightenment

Leading-in:

(1) Let students use Baidu to search for "Enlightenment" and check the picture of Baidu entry;

(2) Guide students to use AI technology to query painting information;^②

(3) Highlighting key information from the painting: Enlightenment, salon culture, Voltaire, and *The Orphan of China*

Assignment: Divide the students into four groups and assign group tasks

Task 1: The Salon culture and the Enlightenment in France

Task 2: Voltaire and the Enlightenment

Task 3: Voltaire and *The Orphan of China*

Task 4: The Enlightenment and China

② Anicet Charles Gabriel Lemonnier (1743–1824), who created in 1812 "Lecture de la tragie" L orphelin de la Chine "de Voltaire dans le salon de madame Geoffrin in 1755" (1755: Lecture of Voltaires Tragedy "The Orphan of China" at Madame Geoffrins Salon)

Task presentation: Students in the group divide their work to find, summarize, sort out and summarize the materials. The representative of the group shares the materials in class, and other members of the group raise questions and make comments

Teacher's summary:

(1) Salon culture provided a unique social foundation and communication network for the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers discussed politics, philosophy, science, literature, and art in salons, promoting the collision of ideas and innovation, which laid the foundation for the formation of the theoretical system of the Enlightenment.

(2) Voltaire opposed feudal despotism, criticized the corruption of the Church, advocated natural rights, supported freedom of speech, and promoted religious tolerance. His works inspired people to pursue freedom, equality, and human rights, which became the important spiritual demands of the Enlightenment. He advocated religious tolerance and cultural diversity, which promoted the exchange and integration of different ideas.

(3) *The Orphan of China* is a play written by Voltaire in 1775, inspired by the Yuan zaju *The Orphan of Zhao*. This work reflects his advocated Enlightenment ideals and understanding of Confucian culture: the superiority of reason and morality over violence and barbarism; the strong assimilative power and inclusiveness of Confucian culture, which can influence foreign rulers; and explores the possibility of a combination between monarchs and moralists, arguing that the authority of monarchs should serve the social moral order.

(4) Confucianism was introduced to Europe through missionaries and became an important source of Enlightenment thought. Enlightenment thinkers idealized the interpretation of Chinese culture, viewing it as a model of rationality, morality, and secular civilization, believing that China's political system and moral framework could provide inspiration for European reforms.

This instructional design begins with a Baidu Encyclopedia image to spark students curiosity about the relationship between visuals and entries, thereby igniting their investigative interest. The teacher guides key information extraction through focused examples, breaking down complex content into manageable components. Group assignments engage students in active learning, while concluding remarks consolidate knowledge delivery. Throughout this process, student motivation serves as the cornerstone of effective teaching design – only when learners are willing to participate does interactive discussion become meaningful. Active participation not only enhances historical data analysis and comparative skills but also cultivates critical thinking. Through layered task designs that progress from specific examples to broader contexts, students experience firsthand the transformative power of cultural exchange and mutual understanding.

3.3 Problem-behavior: emphasizing the teaching evaluation of cultural dialectics

Generally, examinations remain the primary assessment method for lecture-based courses. However, in the era of big data and AI development, knowledge has lost its former "glory" and fallen from its "pedestal", becoming readily available material in daily life. Acquiring knowledge is no longer the ultimate goal of learning but rather a necessary foundation for skill development. "In the system of intercultural communication competence, extensive intercultural knowledge serves as a crucial condition to prevent misunderstandings and misinterpretations in communicative behaviors"^[5]. Of course, mere cultural knowledge and communication skills are insufficient; one must also be able to flexibly apply such knowledge to effectively adapt and resolve practical communication issues. When addressing real-world problems, knowledge on textbook and classroom-acquired skills can only provide supplementary support—they cannot be mechanically replicated in diverse scenarios. Critical thinking not only requires students to present well-reasoned arguments but also demands flexible application and innovative approaches. Therefore, the evaluation of the "Western Civilization History" course should focus on assessing critical thinking abilities, with the following assessment content design:

Task: Read the following material and answer the three questions after the material.

In this new world the most pervasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities. Tribal wars and ethnic conflicts will occur within civilizations. Violence between states and groups from different civilizations, however, carries with it the potential for escalation as other states and groups from these civilizations rally to the support of their "kin countries." ... "Cultural conflicts," Vaclav Havel has observed, "are increasing and are more dangerous today than at any time in history," and Jacques Delors agreed that "future conflicts will be sparked by cultural factors rather than economics or ideology." And the most dangerous cultural conflicts are those along the fault lines between civilizations^[6].

Question 1: Based on the viewpoints presented in the material, describe the core characteristics of Western civilization (taking the United States as an example) and Chinese civilization in terms of religion, history, language, and tradition. Compare the main similarities and differences between the two civilizations in terms of modes of thinking and values, and illustrate with specific historical or contemporary examples.

Question 2: In light of the perspectives on "cultural conflict" mentioned in the material, analyze the root causes of

potential misunderstandings and conflicts between Western civilization and China civilization in international relations. From the perspective of cultural differences, propose proactive strategies to address intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts, and explain how to establish and maintain harmonious international relations through these strategies.

Question 3: Choose a civilization you are less familiar with (such as Middle Eastern civilization, Indian civilization, or African civilization), and through independent research, analyze its core cultural characteristics (including religion, history, language, and traditions). In conjunction with the Chinese civilization, explore how to enhance mutual understanding and respect in cultural exchanges. Finally, discuss your reflections on cultural diversity and civilizational exchanges gained from this study.

The above questions, starting from the materials, create a scenario of cultural conflict and civilizational exchange for students, which require students to engage in independent thinking based on reading comprehension, apply acquired knowledge and mastered skills, and then present their own insights. Meanwhile, the three questions set are designed to assess students different abilities in intercultural aspects: The first question examines students ability to describe and compare the thinking patterns and value concepts of different cultural groups; The second question evaluates students capacity to analyze issues from the perspective of cultural differences, adopt proactive coping strategies in intercultural conflicts, and establish harmonious relationships; The third question assesses students research awareness and capabilities in independently exploring different cultures. Additionally, each questions design integrates Chinese civilization, highlighting its role and influence in global civilizational interactions, thereby cultivating students cultural confidence, patriotic sentiment, and sense of responsibility. In summary, through evaluation-oriented approaches, students are encouraged to recognize the importance of diverse cultures, develop awareness of respecting and understanding different cultures in the context of globalization, comprehend the complexity of cultural conflicts and civilizational exchanges, and enhance their abilities in intercultural analysis and research.

4 Conclusion

In the teaching process of "History of Western Civilization", this study optimizes teaching content, innovates instructional methods, and improves evaluation systems to provide students with progressively deepening learning pathways. It aims to cultivate foreign language talents with global vision, intercultural competence, and patriotic sentiment, thereby contributing to cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries, as well as building a community with a shared future for mankind.

However, developing intercultural competence is a long-term and complex process. While curriculum design plays a crucial role, comprehensive and systematic research throughout the entire educational journey remains essential. For instance, tracking cultivation outcomes over extended periods to collect data for teaching practice improvement; exploring synergies between different curricula to build an integrated framework for cultivating intercultural competence; and addressing individual differences in competency development by providing personalized instructional support tailored to students varying levels and backgrounds.

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