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From Porcelain Artifacts to Value Carriers: A Classroom-Based Exploration of Ceramic Culture Integration in College English Teaching

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ABSTRACT
Blending ideological and political education into subject teaching is not a easy task for Chinese universities—especially for industry-specific ones like ours. At Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute (JCT), College English used to be a disconnected course: students learned language skills but ignored the ceramic culture right under their noses. We wanted to change that. Instead of adding "ideological and political elements" as an afterthought, we built the entire curriculum around ceramic culture—turning passive porcelain objects into active tools for value learning. This wasn't a pre-designed plan; it grew from months of classroom trials, student feedback, and constant adjustments. After one semester, the results were clear: students didn't just speak better English—they understood their cultural heritage deeper and felt more confident sharing it. For universities rooted in unique industries, this kind of practice-driven integration offers a way to make ideological and political education feel natural, not forced.

KEYWORDS
Curriculum ideology and politics; College English; Ceramic culture; Teaching practice; Cultural identity; Intercultural communication

1 Introduction

It was a typical English class at JCT three years ago. I asked students: "Can you talk about Jingdezhen porcelain in English?" The room went silent. Most of them were art majors, they walked past ceramic sculptures every day, but when it came to explaining their hometown's most famous culture in English, they had nothing to say.

That moment stuck with me. The national push for "Curriculum-based Ideological and Political Education" was getting stronger, but how to make it work in English class? Forcing students to recite "cultural confidence" slogans felt wrong. They needed something tangible—something they could touch, research, and care about. Something that wasn't just a textbook chapter or a PowerPoint slide.

Ceramics were the answer. Not as decorative objects, but as "living texts." Think about a simple porcelain teacup: its clay came from local mines, its glaze formula was passed down for centuries, and its shape might reflect ancient Chinese philosophy. What if we used these everyday artifacts to teach English? What if students learned vocabulary by describing ceramic techniques, practiced writing by researching porcelain trade history, and built confidence by sharing their cultural stories with the world?

This paper is the story of that experiment. It's not a polished theoretical model—just a collection of what worked, what didn't, and how we adjusted. We started with small steps: bringing ceramic samples to class, asking students to interview local artisans, and designing projects that required real English use. Along the way, we made mistakes (plenty of them) and changed direction more than once. But in the end, we found a way to turn porcelain into a bridge—connecting language learning, cultural understanding, and value shaping.

2 Theoretical Support and Practical Thinking

We didn't rely on fancy theories to design our teaching. We picked three ideas that made sense for our students, and bent them to fit our classroom.

2.1 Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

The idea is simple: language learning works best when students are focused on meaningful content, not just grammar rules. For our students, ceramic culture is the most meaningful content there is. Instead of teaching "import" and "export" as isolated words, we had them research how Yuan Dynasty cobalt blue was shipped from Persia to Jingdezhen. They learned the vocabulary naturally, because they needed it to tell a story.

2.2 Then there's Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Lectures and textbooks can only take students so far. They need real tasks to practice what they've learned. We designed projects that forced them to use English in practical ways: curating a virtual porcelain exhibition for foreign visitors, writing English scripts for ceramic documentaries, or simulating a business meeting to sell Jingdezhen porcelain to international buyers. These projects weren't just "English exercises"—they were real challenges that required research, collaboration, and clear communication.

2.3 We Also Borrowed from Intercultural Communication Theory—specifically the Idea of "Dialogue" Over "Preaching"

We didn't want students to just repeat Chinese ceramic history in English. We wanted them to engage with different perspectives. For example, when talking about 18th-century export porcelain, we asked: "Why did Chinese artisans change their designs to suit European tastes?" Some students argued it was "cultural compromise," others called it "smart adaptation." The debate wasn't about finding the "right" answer—it was about learning to think critically and express their opinions in English.

Put simply: CLIL gave us the "what" (teach English through ceramic content), PBL gave us the "how" (use projects to drive learning), and intercultural theory gave us the "why" (foster confident, critical cultural communicators). Every theory was tested in the classroom and adjusted based on what our students needed.

3 How We Built the Teaching Pathway

Our so-called "pathway" evolved through trial and error. Let me walk you through the key steps—none of which were planned in advance.

3.1 Starting with "Reading" Ceramic Objects

We began by teaching students to look at ceramics differently. I brought a replica of a Song Dynasty celadon bowl to class. At first, students just described its color ("green") and shape ("round"). But we pushed further: "Why is the glaze so thin?" "What does the simple shape tell us about Song Dynasty aesthetics?"

One student—Micheal, a materials science major—asked a question that changed everything: "Is the celadon color intentional, or just a mistake in firing?" That sparked a week-long project. His group researched celadon glaze chemistry in English, interviewed a ceramic engineering professor, and presented their findings: "The pale green color comes from iron oxide in the glaze, fired at exactly 1300 degrees Celsius. Song artisans spent decades perfecting this process." Their presentation wasn't perfect—they mixed up "firing temperature" with "melting point"—but they were using English to explore something they cared about.

We did this with other ceramic objects too: analyzing dragon patterns on Ming porcelain (talking about imperial power), researching the history of blue-and-white porcelain (discussing global trade), and even examining modern ceramic art (debating tradition vs. innovation). The goal was simple: get students to see ceramics as stories, not just things. By the end of this phase, they weren't just learning English—they were learning to "read" their own culture.

3.2 Moving to "Doing" with Real Scenarios

After students could "read" ceramic texts, we wanted them to "do" something with that knowledge. We tried a "Cultural Heritage Diplomacy" simulation—one group played JCU representatives trying to loan porcelain to a Paris museum, the other played museum curators asking tough questions.

It didn't go well at first. The JCU group kept reciting facts about porcelain history, but the museum curators wanted to know: "Why should our visitors care about this? How does it connect to French culture?" The JCU group was stuck—they hadn't thought about the audience. We paused the simulation, talked about how to adapt cultural stories for different listeners, and tried again.

This time, Amy—an international trade major—led her group to focus on connections: "Your museum has a collection of 18th-century French porcelain. Our Jingdezhen artisans taught French potters how to make hard-paste porcelain in the 1700s. This exhibition could show that cultural exchange isn't one-way—it's a conversation." Their argument worked, and the simulation ended with a "loan agreement." Afterward, Amy told me: "I didn't just practice English—I learned how to explain my culture in a way that matters to others."

We did other hands-on projects too. Students made short English videos about local ceramic workshops, wrote proposals for ceramic-themed tourism projects, and even created an English-language podcast about "porcelain and

modern life." Each project forced them to use their ceramic knowledge in real English contexts. They stopped worrying about "perfect grammar" and started focusing on "clear communication."

3.3 Ending with "Speaking" Their Own Truths

The final step was getting students to make these cultural stories their own. We assigned reflective writing, but let them choose the format—letters, blogs, essays, even poems.

Zhang Hua, a computer science major, wrote a letter to his future self: "Today, I explained Song Dynasty celadon to my group in English. I never thought I'd care about porcelain—growing up in Jingdezhen, I took it for granted. But researching this bowl taught me something: cultural confidence isn't about knowing everything. It's about being curious, asking questions, and sharing what you learn. When I speak English now, I'm not just translating words—I'm sharing a piece of where I come from."

Another student, Chen Li, wrote a blog post comparing Song Dynasty minimalist porcelain to modern Scandinavian design: "Both value simplicity, but for different reasons. Song artisans wanted to highlight the beauty of nature—Scandinavian designers want to fit small apartments. Understanding these differences helps me see my own culture better, and talk about it without sounding like a textbook."

These writings weren't perfect. They had grammar mistakes and awkward sentences. But they had something no AI-generated text could have—voice. Students weren't repeating what they'd been taught; they were expressing their own thoughts, feelings, and understanding. The porcelain had stopped being an "object" and become a "vessel"—carrying their values, identities, and voices.

4 What We Learned from the Implementation

We tested this approach with 150 non-art majors over two semesters. We compared their progress with a control class that used the standard English curriculum. The results were more than just numbers.

Quantitatively, the experimental class did better on language tests—especially in speaking and writing. On a task asking them to explain a ceramic artifact in English, the experimental class averaged 85.2 points, while the control class averaged 68.7. In a survey, 92% of experimental class students said they "felt comfortable talking about Chinese culture in English," compared to 38% in the control class.

But the real changes were qualitative. Students started engaging with ceramic culture outside of class. Li Ming—who had asked about celadon glaze—joined a campus ceramic club. Wang Yu started volunteering at the Jingdezhen Ceramic Museum, helping foreign visitors. Chen Li even wrote a series of English blog posts about porcelain, which got picked up by a travel website.

The most touching feedback came from a student named Zhou Tao. He was quiet at first, struggling to speak English. After the course, he said: "I used to hate English because I thought it was for 'smart people' who wanted to leave China. But this class taught me English is a tool to share China with the world. Last week, I helped a foreign tourist buy porcelain—explained the difference between high-fire and low-fire. He thanked me, and I felt proud. Not because my English was perfect, but because I shared something important."

We also noticed a shift in how students saw their own identity. They stopped seeing themselves as "just" materials science or business majors—they saw themselves as ambassadors of Jingdezhen ceramic culture. That's the real power of this approach: it didn't just teach English; it helped students understand who they are.

5 Challenges, Reflections, and Future Plans

Let's be honest—this approach wasn't easy. We faced three big challenges.

5.1 Teacher Training

English teachers like me didn't know much about ceramic culture. I spent months shadowing ceramic art classes, visiting museums, and asking artisans questions. I made mistakes—once, I told students that "famille rose" porcelain was invented in the Ming Dynasty (it was actually the Qing). A student corrected me, and we turned it into a lesson about researching facts. Universities need to support teachers with interdisciplinary training—connecting English departments with industry-specific departments.

5.2 Time Constraints

The standard College English syllabus is tight. We had to cut some traditional content—like grammar drills—to make room for projects. We solved this by using after-class time for big projects and integrating small ceramic activities into regular classes. It wasn't ideal, but it worked.

5.3 Assessment

How do you grade "cultural confidence" or "critical thinking"? We stopped relying on exams alone. We used portfolios—collecting students' project videos, reflective writings, and presentation recordings. It took more time to grade, but it gave us a better picture of their growth.

Looking back, the biggest lesson is this: ideological and political education doesn't have to be forced. It works best when it's rooted in something students care about—something they can touch, research, and feel proud of. For JCU, that's ceramics. For other universities, it might be something else: maritime history, agricultural innovation, or traditional medicine.

The future plans are simple: we want to expand this approach. We're working with the ceramic art department to create a joint course—"Ceramic Culture and Global Communication." We're also developing online resources—English-language videos about Jingdezhen porcelain, interview guides for students to talk to artisans, and project templates for other teachers.

At the end of the day, this isn't about creating a perfect teaching model. It's about creating meaningful learning experiences. Students don't remember grammar rules or vocabulary lists—they remember the time they helped a foreign tourist, the project they worked on with their group, or the moment they realized their culture was worth sharing.

That's what turning "objects" into "value carriers" is all about. It's not about porcelain—it's about people. It's about helping students find their voice, understand their identity, and share their culture with confidence. And in the process, they just happen to learn English too.

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