

An Empirical Study on Cultivating Intercultural Competence in College English Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The study is based on the theoretical and practical model of intercultural foreign language teaching proposed by Peng (2020), and establishes the teaching objectives, principles, and strategies for intercultural foreign languages teaching. Through experiential, critical, and interactive learning methods, the aim is to cultivate students' intercultural competence. The experimental results have proven the effectiveness of this model, which can actively promote teaching practices.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural competence; College English teaching; University students

1 Introduction

As China increasingly moves towards the center of the world stage and the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind is proposed, intercultural education has become a new educational philosophy and development trend. However, there is a lack of systematic and standardized model frameworks to refer to in practical teaching. This study integrates the theoretical and practical models of intercultural foreign language teaching proposed by PENG (2020) with college English teaching. The aim is to guide teaching practices while examining the effectiveness and feasibility of the model, providing insights for more in-depth intercultural education.

2 Background

Domestic scholars began to engage in intercultural competence research in the early 1990s, which has rapidly developed in the fields of foreign language teaching, teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and mass media. In the 21st century, multiculturalism and multilingual education have emerged as dominant trends (DAI 2010). Research on intercultural foreign language teaching focused on intercultural competence cultivation is primarily categorized into three types: research on goals, principles, and approaches; the development of theoretical and practical models; and empirical investigations in diverse foreign language courses (PENG 2020). Among the studies closely related to this topic, most reflect a Western perspective. In recent years, many domestic scholars have made active attempts and explorations in theoretical and practical models (e.g., KONG and LUAN 2012; WU 2013; SUN AND XU 2014; GU 2017). Based on WU (2013) six-dimension model of Chinese university students' intercultural competence, PENG (2020) constructed theoretical and practical models for intercultural foreign language teaching. Drawing on the five principles of intercultural teaching proposed by LIDICCOAT et al. (2003) and referring to relevant empirical

studies (e.g., CHANG and ZHAO 2012; HUANG 2015; FU and ZHANG 2017), this study established a practical model for intercultural foreign language teaching. PENG's theoretical and practical models provide a framework and guidance for the current study.

3 Model Building

Relying on PENG (2020) theoretical and practical models for intercultural foreign language teaching, this study utilizes the undergraduate college English curriculum as a platform. At the initial stage of teaching reform, a needs assessment is designed, utilizing language tests, self-assessment scales, interviews, and questionnaires to understand learners' linguistic and cultural literacy. Specific teaching goals are then established based on learners' needs and the characteristics of the curriculum. Through experiential, critical thinking, and interactive teaching and learning methods, a teaching strategy mechanism is constructed to cultivate students' intercultural competence, encompassing six dimensions: knowledge of self, knowledge of others, attitude, intercultural cognitive skills, intercultural communication skills, and awareness. The ultimate goal is to achieve competency-based objectives. Finally, comprehensive teaching evaluations are conducted to assess the practical effects of intercultural education, providing empirical evidence and improvement measures for the models of intercultural foreign language teaching.

4 Methods

4.1 Participants

The participants were selected from the undergraduate classes of Qufu Normal University, with class 1 as the experimental class (70/97) and class 2 as the control class (74/84). The undergraduate English courses in this university are self-selected, with students from different departments and majors. The experimental class adopted the teaching model under the framework of intercultural competence development, while the control class followed the traditional teaching model. The textbook used for both classes was *New Standard College English* (Book 1), published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. Both classes were taught by the same teacher, spanning 15 weeks within 30 class hours.

4.2 Procedure

Step 1: Discovering and Experiencing Culture

The teacher integrated appropriate Chinese and Western culture into classroom lectures based on the text content. After class, the teacher provided thematic reading materials through online platforms such as Rain Classroom. Students in the experimental class were assigned cultural research tasks at the beginning of the semester. They could choose a target country for cultural research based on their personal experience and interests, or they could conduct cultural expansions related to the textbook content.

Step 2: Comparing and Analyzing Culture

Students in the experimental class could conduct research individually or in groups, using various channels (online searches, library resources, interviews, etc.) to gather information related to their chosen topics. They explored the similarities and differences between their native culture and the target culture, analyzed the causes of the differences, and presented their final reports in the form of PPT or word documents.

Step 3: Critically Reflecting on Culture

Students took turns to present their reports within the first ten minutes of each class. Based on the feedback from teachers and peers, students reflected on and improved their research processes and conclusions, completed feedback questionnaires, and wrote research reflections.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed a combined quantitative and qualitative research approach, utilizing the following tools and methods for data collection and analysis.

(1) This study adopted the intercultural competence self-assessment scale designed by WU et al. (2013) specifically for Chinese university students. The scale is in Chinese, encompassing six dimensions, including 3 questions on knowledge of self, 7 on knowledge of others, 3 on attitudes, 9 on intercultural communication skills, 3 on intercultural cognitive skills, and 3 on awareness. It consists of 28 test items in the form of a Likert scale, where participants choose from numbers 1 to 5 (1 representing very weak/little, and 5 representing very strong/a lot). This scale was administered to the experimental class before and after the experiment.

(2) After the experiment, a feedback questionnaire was distributed to the experimental class, focusing on the following questions:

- (a) Why did you choose your current topic for your cultural research project this semester?
 - (b) What insights and gains did you have during the process of cultural studies?
 - (c) How has your understanding of intercultural awareness and intercultural communication changed before and after completing the research?
 - (d) Will you continue to pay attention to the comparison between Chinese and foreign cultures and enhance your intercultural competence in future study and work? If so, in what aspects do you plan to do?
- (3) The final reports were submitted in the form of PPT or word documents, with 70 submissions from the experimental class.

5 Results and Discussion

In this section, we delve into the changes in students' intercultural communication competence from six dimensions: knowledge of self, knowledge of others, attitude, intercultural communication skills, intercultural cognitive skills, and awareness. Utilizing SPSS 26.0 software, we conduct statistical analyses on the pre- and post-test results, complemented by students' feedback on the teaching model of intercultural competence development.

Independent t-test was conducted on the experimental and control classes. Table 1 demonstrates the results of the independent t-test for undergraduate students' intercultural competence.

5.1 Changes in Attitude

Table 1 reveals that there was a slight but significant difference in the attitude dimension between the experimental class and the control class before the experiment. After the experiment, the difference between the two classes became significant, indicating that the intercultural competence development model effectively enhanced students' intercultural competence at the attitudinal level.

Statistical results suggest that most students have a strong desire to communicate with and learn from foreigners of different cultures, respecting their lifestyles and customs, and are willing to learn foreign languages and cultures. However, feedback from questionnaires revealed that over 76%

undergraduate students have not had genuine opportunities to interact with foreigners, and due to a lack of confidence in their language skills, they may not actively engage when such opportunities arise. Additionally, the lack of authentic intercultural communication contexts in their English learning may have influenced some students' attitudes towards intercultural communication.

Table 1 Independent T-test Results of Undergraduate Students' Intercultural Competence

Variables		Experimental class (n=70)		Controlled class (n=74)		t	P
Pre-test	Knowledge of Self	3.55	0.68	3.41	0.68	1.220	0.225
	Knowledge of Others	1.94	0.61	2.10	0.66	-1.510	0.133
	Attitude	4.21	0.66	3.99	0.68	2.030	0.044
	Intercultural Communication Skills	3.24	0.56	3.32	0.57	-0.825	0.411
	Intercultural Cognitive Skills	2.53	0.67	2.94	0.62	-3.802	0
	Consciousness	3.64	0.65	3.49	0.68	1.369	0.173
Post-test	Knowledge of self	3.86	0.57	3.38	0.73	4.396	0
	Knowledge of others	2.52	0.54	2.09	0.66	4.236	0
	Attitude	4.19	0.57	3.84	0.74	3.163	0.002
	Intercultural Communication Skills	3.57	0.57	3.29	0.59	2.809	0.006
	Intercultural Cognitive Skills	3.10	0.69	2.94	0.62	1.450	0.149
	Consciousness	3.83	0.61	3.43	0.73	3.524	0.001

* $P < 0.05$

5.2 Changes in Awareness

Table 1 indicates that there was no significant difference in intercultural awareness between the experimental and control classes before the experiment. However, after the experiment, a significant difference was observed. This suggests that the intercultural competence development model effectively enhances students' intercultural communication skills at the level of awareness.

Awareness is an integral dimension in the development of intercultural competence, along with attitude, knowledge, and skills. Participants in this survey were all non-English majors, constrained by their language proficiency. Many students tended to focus more on maintaining smooth conversations when communicating with native English speakers, resulting in a superficial level of intercultural awareness. They often overlooked the impact of cultural identity differences and value discrepancies on communication. After a semester of cultural studies, students reported in their feedback surveys that their intercultural awareness and understanding of intercultural communication had significantly improved. They pledged to continue comparing Chinese and foreign cultures and analyzing issues from an intercultural perspective in their future study and work.

5.3 Changes in Knowledge of Self

Table 1 also reveals that there was no significant difference in knowledge of self between the experimental and control classes before the experiment, but a significant difference emerged after the experiment. This demonstrates that the intercultural competence development model effectively enhances students' understanding of their native culture.

Students exhibited a strong cognitive grasp of their native culture, including knowledge of historical events, social norms, and values. Through a semester of cultural research, students began to delve into the inner essence of cultural differences, gaining a more comprehensive and profound understanding of culture. Students reported that during the process, they had their horizons broadened and they are allowed to gain a deeper appreciation of the unique and profound Chinese

culture that has evolved over 5,000 years. It has been a highly meaningful learning experience.

5.4 Changes in Knowledge of Others

Table 1 indicates that there was no significant difference in knowledge of others between the experimental and control groups before the experiment. However, after the experiment, a significant difference emerged, validating the effectiveness of the intercultural competence cultivation model.

Consistent with the quantitative analysis, the questionnaire feedback revealed that most students had a limited understanding of Western countries, and they had a strong desire to broaden their horizons through this cultural project. They expressed intentions to improve their intercultural communication skills by leveraging resources such as newspapers, books, foreign movies, documentaries, online English learning courses, and interactions with foreign language teachers. Many students expressed a wish to have the opportunity to engage in international exchanges and experience authentic intercultural communication scenarios.

Therefore, in foreign language teaching, the input of authentic language and foreign cultures is crucial for enhancing students' intercultural competence. Thus, teachers need to continuously deepen their understanding of foreign cultures and refine traditional language teaching methods. They should actively explore foreign language teaching models centered on cultural knowledge transmission to better meet the needs of students.

5.5 Changes in Intercultural Communication Skills

Table 1 reveals that there was no significant difference in intercultural communication skills between the experimental and control classes before the experiment. However, after the experiment, a significant difference emerged, demonstrating the effectiveness of the intercultural competence cultivation model in enhancing students' intercultural communication skills.

In this study, some students explored differences in polite language and privacy rights between China and other countries, while others investigated differences in emotional expression between the East and the West. Through these investigations, many students realized that intercultural communication is not merely about understanding cultural differences but also about applying this understanding in daily life. By comparing cultural differences and refining a mindset to handle situations based on these differences, students broadened their horizons and enhanced their intercultural communication skills. Some students reported that they had previously held limited or incorrect stereotypes about Westerners. Through their cultural research, they learned to view events from multiple angles.

5.6 Changes in Intercultural Cognitive Skills

According to Table 1, before the experiment, the intercultural cognitive skills of the experimental class were lower than those of the control class, with a significant difference. After the experiment, the intercultural cognitive skills of the experimental class surpassed those of the control class, but the difference between the two classes was not significant. While intercultural cognitive skills remained relatively low in both classes, the model still effectively improved students' intercultural cognitive skills.

The questionnaire results showed most students demonstrated sensitivity to cultural differences between China and the West and were able to rationally respect these differences. Many students expressed a liking for English learning and a willingness to understand cultural collisions in different countries. But at the same time, they acknowledged that their language proficiency needed

improvement. However, the ways to improve their language proficiency were limited to books, media, online resources, foreign films, and internet information, with few opportunities to interact with foreigners or engage in authentic intercultural communication scenarios. All this contributed to their relatively low intercultural cognitive skills.

Therefore, in order to improve students' intercultural cognitive competence and cultivate talents that meet international needs, in addition to overseas study exchange programs, universities should also adopt diverse teaching methods. For instance, simulating authentic scenarios in language teaching can help students grasp intercultural communication strategies. Observing and analyzing intercultural communication cases can deepen their understanding of communication styles in different cultural contexts. Additionally, providing specific intercultural skills guidance and training can assist students in successfully communicating with individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds.

6 Conclusion

This study is guided by the intercultural competence cultivation model and has developed specific teaching objectives that are suitable for the characteristics of college English courses. By adopting a diversified teaching implementation plan and integrating intercultural education into language teaching, the aim is to cultivate students' intercultural observation, understanding, and analysis skills, ultimately shaping them into international talents with global awareness.

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