

Cultivating Core Competencies in English through Local Red Culture: A Tangshan-Based Pedagogical Model for Middle School Students

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Abstract: Integrating local cultural resources into language teaching is a significant trend in fostering students' core competencies. This study addresses the challenge of effectively implementing China's educational policy of "Core Competencies for English as a Subject" in middle school classrooms by leveraging the unique revolutionary ("Red") culture of Tangshan City. The research developed and tested a pedagogical model that utilizes Tangshan's rich Red Culture heritage—such as the Kailuan Miners' Movement and the Xifengkou Great Wall Resistance relics—as authentic content for English language learning. Employing a mixed-methods approach, including literature review, fieldwork, action research, and case analysis in partner middle schools, the project involved designing thematic teaching resources (e.g., lesson plans, micro-lectures) and implementing interactive activities like role-playing and project-based learning. Findings indicate that this localized approach significantly enhanced students' engagement, cultural awareness, critical thinking, and language application skills, effectively addressing the four dimensions of English core competencies: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, and learning ability. The study concludes that the "Local Culture-Integrated Core Competency Model" provides a practical, replicable framework for synergizing values education with language acquisition. It offers valuable insights for educators worldwide seeking to incorporate local history and values into foreign language curricula, promoting deeper contextual learning.

Keywords: English core competencies; Local culture; Middle school English teaching; Pedagogical model; Curriculum integration

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1. Introduction

The shift in modern language education towards fostering core competencies, transcending the mere acquisition of linguistic knowledge, represents a global paradigm shift. In China, this is encapsulated in the *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)* ^[1], which explicitly outlines four key core competencies for English as a subject: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, and learning

ability. A central challenge for educators lies in finding authentic and engaging contexts to develop these competencies simultaneously. While cultural content is recognized as crucial, the source of this culture often remains abstract or nationally generalized, potentially lacking immediate relevance for students.

This study proposes that local culture, particularly the profound revolutionary heritage known as “Red Culture,” offers a powerful, underutilized reservoir for meaningful language learning. Tangshan, an industrial city with a significant history of labor movements and wartime resistance, provides an ideal context. This paper presents the findings of an educational action research project that explored the pathways and effectiveness of using Tangshan’s Red Culture as a carrier to cultivate English core competencies in middle school students. The research questions were: How can a pedagogical model be designed to systematically integrate Tangshan’s local Red Culture resources into middle school English teaching to target core competencies? What is the perceived impact of this model on student engagement and the development of the four core competencies? What are the practical implications for teachers seeking to implement a localized, competency-based approach?

2. Literature review

2.1. The core competencies framework in language education

The concept of “core competencies” aligns with international movements emphasizing transferable skills and dispositions, such as DeSeCo’s key competencies ^[2] and the 4Cs (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity) in Western education. Within the Chinese context, the *English Curriculum Standards (2022)* operationalize these ideas into a subject-specific framework, demanding a holistic approach to teaching that integrates knowledge, skills, and values ^[3].

2.2. Culture-integrated language teaching

The integral and multifaceted role of culture in language learning has been well-established through decades of research in applied linguistics and language education ^[4]. The Council for Language in Teaching strongly maintains that language and culture are fundamentally inseparable, forming an interdependent relationship where meaningful and effective language acquisition only occurs when students actively engage with authentic cultural content. This culturally-embedded approach not only fosters deeper intercultural understanding and global competence but also provides students with genuine, real-world purposes for communication that extend beyond mere linguistic accuracy. Recent pedagogical studies have particularly emphasized the significant benefits of incorporating local cultural knowledge into language curricula, an educational strategy commonly referred to as “place-based education.” This localized approach has been shown to dramatically enhance both the relevance of language instruction to students’ lived experiences and their intrinsic motivation to learn, as it connects abstract language concepts to tangible cultural contexts that learners can directly relate to and appreciate.

2.3. The gap: Local Red Culture in ELT

While the integration of Chinese cultural elements into English Language Teaching (ELT) has gradually gained scholarly attention in recent years, Integrating red cultural resources into the curriculum of primary and secondary schools not only helps students inherit and carry forward the revolutionary spirit of revolutionary martyrs, but also is an important way to guide students to build correct values and beliefs in life ^[5]. The specific utilization and pedagogical application of local Red Culture resources remains a relatively underdeveloped and nascent research area. Current academic investigations predominantly concentrate on the incorporation of Red

Culture in history or political science curricula, while its potential application in foreign language education, especially within the context of middle school English classrooms, has received remarkably limited attention. This research project specifically aims to address this significant gap in the literature by conducting a systematic exploration of how particular local Red Culture resources, with their unique historical and ideological value, can be effectively translated into practical pedagogical approaches for competency-based English language instruction. The study seeks to develop concrete methodologies for incorporating these culturally significant materials into middle school ELT while maintaining alignment with contemporary educational objectives and language acquisition principles ^[6].

3. Methodology

This study adopted an educational design research approach, combining iterative development of teaching materials with practical implementation and evaluation.

3.1. Phase 1: Resource identification and analysis (literature review & fieldwork)

The initial phase involved a comprehensive analysis of the *English Curriculum Standards (2022)* to pinpoint competency descriptors. Concurrently, through fieldwork at sites like the Kailuan National Mine Park and Xifengkou Resistance, the research team documented Tangshan's Red Culture resources—historical narratives, artifacts, and spiritual connotations (e.g., resilience, solidarity). The crucial step was mapping these cultural elements onto the four core competencies. For example, stories of miner solidarity were linked to cultural awareness (understanding collective values) and thinking capacity (analyzing causes and effects), while creating English narratives about these stories targeted language ability.

3.2. Phase 2: Pedagogical model and resource development

Based on the comprehensive mapping of educational objectives and learning outcomes, a robust pedagogical model was systematically constructed, with its core philosophy centered on creating authentic, immersive learning scenarios that closely mirror real-world situations. This innovative model strategically prioritized two evidence-based instructional approaches: task-based language teaching to enhance practical language application skills, and project-based learning ^[7] to foster collaborative problem-solving abilities. To fully support this pedagogical framework, an extensive suite of meticulously designed teaching resources was developed, comprising three main categories:

- (1) Thematic unit plans: These included detailed, multi-lesson sequences such as a comprehensive unit on “Community Heroes” that prominently featured the historical contributions of the Kailuan miners, integrating language learning with cultural and historical awareness.
- (2) Multimedia materials: A rich collection of engaging digital resources, including professionally produced short English videos (micro-lectures) documenting significant historical sites, along with bilingual picture stories that visually narrated important cultural narratives to enhance comprehension.
- (3) Activity kits: Carefully crafted interactive materials designed for various classroom applications, including immersive role-play scenarios (such as simulating negotiations for workers' rights), thought-provoking group discussion guides (exploring themes like the essential qualities of a hero), and comprehensive project task instructions (for instance, the challenging yet rewarding “Create an English brochure for a Tangshan Red Culture site” assignment).

3.3. Phase 3: Implementation and data collection (action research)

The model and resources were implemented over one semester in selected Tangshan middle schools (Grade 8, approximately 200 students). Data collection was multi-faceted:

- (1) Teacher logs and reflections: Researchers and cooperating teachers documented classroom observations, student responses, and adjustments made to teaching strategies.
- (2) Student artifacts: Collection of students' work, such as written assignments, project outputs, and presentation videos.
- (3) Surveys and focus groups: Pre- and post-intervention surveys gauged changes in student attitudes towards English learning and their awareness of local culture. Small group interviews provided qualitative insights into their learning experiences.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Enhanced engagement and contextualized language use

The most striking and immediate observation from the classroom implementation was a remarkably significant increase in student motivation and engagement levels. When the curriculum incorporated topics deeply rooted in local history and cultural heritage, particularly compelling historical events like the dramatic defense at Xifengkou during wartime, students demonstrated substantially greater interest and enthusiasm compared to when they studied generic, decontextualized textbook content. This profound connection to local narratives created an emotional resonance that traditional materials often failed to achieve. The heightened engagement naturally translated into noticeably more active and voluntary participation across various language learning tasks and activities. Students showed greater willingness and even eagerness to use English as they discussed, debated, and presented on topics they felt a genuine personal and cultural connection to, thereby practicing and developing their language abilities within authentic, meaningful contexts that held real significance for them. These findings strongly support and extend Smith's well-documented assertion that place-based learning approaches create particularly powerful affective conditions that significantly enhance language acquisition by tapping into learners' intrinsic motivation and sense of identity.

4.2. Development of cultural awareness and critical thinking

By incorporating Tangshan's distinctive Red Culture as the core educational content, this pedagogical approach facilitated a sophisticated and multi-layered cultivation of cultural understanding. Learners progressed from possessing merely surface-level familiarity with Chinese cultural elements to actively and thoughtfully examining the profound philosophical concepts and ethical principles exemplified in Tangshan's historical narrative, particularly the enduring virtues of resilience and communal solidarity. A concrete illustration of this depth of engagement emerged when students undertook comparative studies between the flamboyant portrayals of "heroism" prevalent in Western cinematic traditions and the unassuming yet profound acts of courage demonstrated by Tangshan's local revolutionary figures during periods of adversity. Such intellectual exercises not only activated higher-order cognitive functions but also fostered the development of analytical reasoning and evaluative judgment skills. These educational outcomes directly correspond with the fundamental objectives outlined in the CILT framework, which emphasizes the cultivation of critical intercultural competence that enables individuals to navigate and interpret cultural phenomena with discernment and insight.

4.3. Fostering learning ability and autonomy

The project-based learning components, particularly those involving student research and creative tasks such as developing an English presentation about a local historical figure, demonstrated significant effectiveness in enhancing students' overall learning ability. Through these activities, learners were required to engage in collaborative teamwork, systematically organize and evaluate information sources, and skillfully employ various digital technologies and presentation tools—all of which represent fundamental learning strategies in modern education. This pedagogical approach successfully transformed the traditional passive knowledge reception model into an active knowledge construction process, where students took ownership of their learning journey. Such transformation aligns perfectly with and strongly supports the core competencies framework, which emphasizes the development of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and autonomous learning capabilities essential for 21st-century education. The hands-on nature of these projects not only deepened subject-specific understanding but also cultivated transferable skills, thereby contributing to the attainment of the English subject's broader educational goals^[8].

4.4. Practical model for teachers

The newly developed “Local Culture-Integrated Core Competency Model” offered educators a comprehensive and well-organized pedagogical framework that significantly enhanced their teaching practices. This innovative model clearly illustrated how values education, particularly the incorporation of Red Culture elements, could be effectively implemented without necessitating standalone lectures or disrupting the natural flow of classroom instruction. By demonstrating practical methods for seamlessly integrating ideological and political education objectives into language learning activities, the model made these crucial educational goals more organic, accessible, and attainable within the existing curriculum structure. The framework's design showed teachers how to naturally embed cultural values and ideological concepts into various language acquisition exercises, thereby creating a more cohesive and meaningful learning experience for students while maintaining the primary focus on language development.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the strategic integration of local Red Culture into middle school English teaching is a highly effective pathway for cultivating the core competencies outlined in the national curriculum. The key outcomes include: A practical pedagogical model that links local cultural content with specific language learning objectives and competency development; empirical evidence of increased student engagement and improvement across the four core competency dimensions; and a set of adaptable teaching resources that serve as an exemplar for other regions.

The main implication is that English language teaching can be profoundly enriched by looking inward to local contexts, transforming the classroom into a space for exploring local identity while building global communication skills. This model is transferable to other localities possessing unique cultural or historical heritage. Future research should involve longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact and explore the application of this model in different grade levels or cultural settings.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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