

# A Study of the Cultivation of Intercultural Communication Competence in English Teaching in Colleges and Universities

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**Abstract:** Cultivating students' intercultural communication competence (ICC) has become an important goal of English Teaching in colleges and universities in China. At present, there are a few problems existing in the cultivation of ICC in the English teaching process at universities, and there is a need to make some reforms in terms of teaching ideologies, curriculum design as well as teaching contents. Cultivating students' intercultural communication competence should start with the cultivation of their intercultural communication competence awareness, while taking into account the synchronous improvement of knowledge, attitude, and skills. In addition, it is important to pay attention to the impact of ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) on the cultivation of intercultural communication competence. What's more, modern information and digital technology should be utilized to improve methods of English teaching in colleges and universities to enhance students' intercultural communication competence effectively.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC); Intercultural communication awareness; English teaching; English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

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## 1. Introduction

In the macro context of economic globalization and cultural diversity, demand for talents with cross-cultural communication skills and the ability to effectively promote cross-cultural exchange has become increasingly urgent. Chinese universities or colleges have set the objectives of English teaching as "cultivating students' ability of the practical use of English, enhancing intercultural communication awareness and communication skills, while developing self-learning ability, and improving comprehensive cultural literacy". Cultivating students' intercultural communication competence has become an important task in English teaching, which points out the direction for English curriculum design and teaching reform. English teaching in colleges and universities should actively explore approaches and strategies to cultivate students' intercultural communication competence.

## 2. Definition and Connotation of Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural communication competence can be defined as the comprehensive abilities that communicators need to ensure the effectiveness and appropriateness of communication with people from different languages and cultural backgrounds <sup>[1]</sup>. Appropriateness and effectiveness are often regarded as two important evaluation dimensions of intercultural communication competence. Effectiveness refers to the completion of communicative tasks and the achievement of communicative goals. Appropriateness refers to the fact that both parties do not violate each other's social customs during the communication process, and the relationship between the two parties is actively maintained <sup>[2]</sup>.

Scholars have conducted theoretical discussions on the composing elements of intercultural communication competence, and it is generally believed that intercultural communication competence includes multiple dimensions. Spitzberg (1989) believed that knowledge, attitude, and skills are the three core elements that constitute intercultural communication competence <sup>[2]</sup>. Chen et al. (1996) proposed that intercultural communication competence includes intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural adroitness. Among them, intercultural awareness is the cognitive level of cross-cultural communication ability, mainly including cultural awareness and personal awareness. Intercultural sensitivity is the emotional aspect of intercultural communication competence, which includes six factors: self-esteem, self-regulation, empathy, openness, non-judgment, and social relaxation. Intercultural adroitness is the behavioral aspect of intercultural communication competence, mainly reflected in information skills, moderate self-disclosure, behavioral flexibility, interactive management, and social skills <sup>[3]</sup>. Byram's (1997) "Five Knows" model explains the composition of intercultural communication competence from three levels: attitude, knowledge, and skills. The attitude level includes curiosity, an open mindset, and a willingness to suspend ethnocentrism. The knowledge level refers to the understanding of the social groups and cultural interactions between one's ethnic group and those of other countries. The skill level includes two aspects: one is explanatory/relational skills, which means being able to understand, articulate, or explain different cultures; The second is discovery/interaction skills, which means being able to acquire new knowledge about different cultures and use existing knowledge, attitudes, and skills for intercultural communication. The last "know" is centered around critical cultural awareness, referring to the ability to make cultural comparisons and critical evaluations <sup>[4]</sup>.

Fantini (2000) proposed a four-dimensional "A+ASK" model of intercultural communication competence, advocating that consciousness is the starting point for cultivating intercultural communication competence. In this model, "ASK" represents the three dimensions of intercultural communication competence, attitude (or emotion), skills, and knowledge, in sequence, while the other "A" represents consciousness, occupying a central position and influencing the development of the other three dimensions <sup>[1]</sup>. Deardorff's (2006) "pyramid" model of ICC divides intercultural communication competence into four levels. The first level is attitude, including respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery. The second level is divided into two mutually reinforcing dimensions: one is knowledge and understanding, including cultural self-awareness, specific cultural information, social language awareness, etc; the other is skills, including listening, observation, interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and correlation. The third level is the ideal internal outcome, including adaptability, flexibility, national cultural relativism, and empathy. The fourth level is the ideal external outcome, which refers to effective and appropriate intercultural communication based on personal cross-cultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes <sup>[5]</sup>.

In summary, intercultural communication is a multi-dimensional construct, and the cultivation of intercultural communication competence requires synchronous improvement in various aspects such as knowledge, attitude, and skills.

### **3. The current situation of cultivating intercultural communication skills in English teaching in colleges and universities**

Under the background of the new era, the cultivation of students' intercultural communication competence has been emphasized by more and more teachers and scholars. Some scholars have constructed a framework for the cultivation of intercultural communication competence in University English teaching with local characteristics based on the theory of intercultural communication competence<sup>[6,7]</sup>. Other scholars discussed specific strategies for developing students' intercultural communication competence in teaching practices<sup>[8,9]</sup>.

Although the cultivation of intercultural communication competence in English teaching in colleges and universities has achieved remarkable results, there are still some shortcomings, mainly in the following aspects:

Firstly, there is a lack of a systematic and process-oriented approach to guide the cultivation of intercultural communication competence in English teaching. The formation of intercultural communication competence is a constructive process, and it is necessary to start from the perspective of constructivism, grasp the overall construction idea, find a good entry point for the cultivation of intercultural communication competence, and at the same time pay attention to the coordinated development of the constituent elements of intercultural communication competence.

Secondly, English as a lingua franca (ELF) has increased the communication and collision among different cultures. However, at present, most of the contents of English teaching in colleges and universities still focus on the cultures of mainstream English-speaking countries, such as Britain and the U.S.A. Since English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has increased the variations of the English language<sup>[10]</sup>, focusing only on the cultural knowledge and linguistic norms of mainstream English-speaking countries cannot satisfy the new requirements for the cultivation of intercultural communication competence in the context of ELF.

Thirdly, the mode of cultivating intercultural communication competence in English teaching is single and fixed. Given that intercultural communication competence examines the ability of communicators in actual interpersonal communication, the improvement of intercultural communication competence is inseparable from practice. However, at present, the main way to cultivate intercultural communication competence in universities and colleges is through classroom teaching. Teachers mostly cultivate students' intercultural communication competence through lectures and case studies in the course of classroom teaching, while the real practice of intercultural communication competence is relatively weak.

### **4. Strategies for cultivating intercultural communication competence in English teaching in colleges and universities**

In order to solve the aforementioned problems, English teaching in colleges and universities should update the teaching ideologies, optimize the teaching design and content, and improve the teaching mode to improve the effectiveness of the cultivation of students' intercultural communication competence. Specific strategies include the following aspects:

#### **4.1. Cultivating students' intercultural communication competence with intercultural awareness as a starting point**

Intercultural communication competence is a gradual process that takes place over a long period of time. For intercultural communicators, their intercultural communication competence is always in the process of formation, during which there may be degradation or stagnation, and they are constantly approaching, but

cannot realize, the ultimate goal of “being completely competent in intercultural communication”<sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, the formation of intercultural communication competence can be regarded as a constructive process, and it is necessary to find the entry point for the cultivation of intercultural communication competence and start the construction of intercultural communication competence from the entry point.

The composition of intercultural communication competence includes several elements, such as awareness, attitude, knowledge, skills and so on. Fantini (2000) states that awareness exists in and belongs to the “self” and that it is always about the self about someone or something else<sup>[1]</sup>. Awareness leads to deeper perceptions, skills, and attitudes, as well as contributing to their development. It is the key to entering other cultures and being accepted by members of those cultures. How and to what extent we develop awareness directly or indirectly affects intercultural competence. Therefore, intercultural communication awareness is the core of the formation of intercultural communication competence, and English teaching in colleges and universities should take intercultural communication awareness as the starting point to cultivate students’ intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication awareness refers to the degree of foreign language learners’ awareness of and concern for intercultural communication practice, which is specifically manifested in the unity of knowledge, emotion and intention.

Here, knowledge refers to cognition, which is embodied in the pursuit of knowledge and appropriateness of intercultural communication practice; emotion refers to feelings, which is embodied in the recognition of and attention to intercultural communication practice in the process of foreign language learning; and intention refers to will, which is embodied in the perseverance and confidence of foreign language learners to continuously improve intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication awareness is the foundation that guides foreign language learners to construct intercultural communication competence dimensions such as knowledge, attitude and skills simultaneously. With correct intercultural communication awareness, intercultural communicators can cultivate intercultural attitudes that break through their limitations and tolerate differences, and at the same time emphasize the accumulation of cultural knowledge and the improvement of foreign language skills in intercultural communication practice. As a result, the various elements of intercultural communication competence will enter into a closed loop of positive feedback, and will be continuously improved in a reciprocal cycle of mutual stimulation and mutual encouragement, thus constantly approaching to the goal of “being completely competent in intercultural communication.”

## **4.2. The process of English teaching in colleges and universities**

The process of English teaching in colleges and universities should be updated in terms of teaching ideologies and content, focusing on cultivating students’ sensitivity and adaptability to the variability of the English language in the context of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), as well as their comprehension of multiculturalism.

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has become a mediating language for communication between different cultural communities and native speakers. However, the difficulty of intercultural communication has increased because of the variability created more or less in the use of English by people with different native language backgrounds. While referring to the norms of language use of native English speakers, University English teachers should encourage students to reduce their linguistic variability and to adapt to the linguistic variability of the communicative targets of different cultural backgrounds.

For this purpose, teachers should give students models of authentic English expressions, correct students’ pronunciation deviations and pragmatic errors, guide students to have more exposure to bilingual English



expression materials and analyze their linguistic differences, train students' comprehension of different accents, and lay a solid foundation of language skills for effective intercultural communication. With the global localization of English, variants with unique cultural imprints, such as Indian English and Singaporean English, should be incorporated into teaching materials more often. Therefore, it is not enough to teach the cultures of mainstream English-speaking countries in the context of general English. Teachers should incorporate multicultural content into their teaching design, focus on training students' ability to perceive and understand the world's diverse cultures, and cultivate their tolerance and appreciation of multiculturalism.

### **4.3. Technique of English teaching in colleges and universities**

English teaching in colleges and universities should utilize information technology and digital technology to strengthen situational and experiential teaching methods to simulate cross-cultural communication practices in real situations, so as to increase students' cross-cultural contacts and interactions, and to enhance students' cross-cultural communication competence.

Intercultural encounters and interactions help intercultural communicators to “construct and negotiate meanings with different cultural groups, and to constantly examine and reflect on one's cultural patterns and cultural behaviors”<sup>[11]</sup>. The traditional teaching mode is to cultivate intercultural communication competence through case studies, etc., and students have fewer chances to have intercultural contacts and interactions. The rapid development of information technology and digital technology has brought changes and innovations to the cultivation of intercultural communication competence. English teaching in colleges and universities can simulate intercultural communication scenarios by offering virtual simulation courses. The virtual simulation courses can set up various intercultural communication scenarios, such as international conferences, business negotiations, cultural exchange activities, and so on. This helps students to shorten the distance between knowledge acquisition and practical application, and compensates for the lack of cross-cultural exposure on college campuses. Students can experience the way of thinking and communication styles of people from different cultural backgrounds through role-playing, and these activities not only require students to participate in them but also require them to observe their own and other people's emotional reactions to make them realize the various emotional reactions that may occur in the process of intercultural communication, and clarify the causes of the emotional reactions through the discussion sessions, form an objective understanding of cultural differences, and thus increase the cross-cultural thinking and discernment. The students will realize the various emotional reactions that may occur in the process of cross-cultural communication.

## **5. Conclusion**

Cultivating students' intercultural communication competence has become an important task of foreign language teaching in colleges and universities in the new era, which helps to promote the goal of cultivating talents with cultural confidence and international vision in higher education, and at the same time promotes cross-cultural exchanges, reduces cultural prejudices and misunderstandings, and promotes mutual understanding of civilizations. In the process of English teaching, college teachers should focus on the cultivation of intercultural communication awareness as the starting point to promote the cycle of intercultural communication competence. At the same time, teachers should pay attention to the influence of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) on the cultivation of intercultural communication competence, and cultivate students' sensitivity and adaptability to the variability of the English language, as well as their insight and

understanding of multiculturalism. In addition, English teaching in colleges and universities should utilize modern information technology and digital technology to simulate intercultural communication practices through virtual simulation courses, thus helping students to enhance intercultural communication competence in intercultural contacts and interactions.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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