

Study on the Strategies for Cultivating Intercultural Communication Competence in English Unit Integrated Teaching

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Abstract

The cultivation of students' intercultural communication competence is an important task in English teaching of k-12 stages. However, previous literature attached due importance to the cultivation of intercultural communication knowledge and awareness but neglected the development of intercultural communication behaviors. Therefore, this study explores to cultivate intercultural communication competence in the whole process of unit integrated teaching, including defining unit big idea, formulating lesson goals, designing layered teaching activities and diversified evaluation plans to promote the all-round development of students' intercultural communication knowledge, awareness, and behaviors.

Keywords

Intercultural communication competence; Unit integrated teaching; Intercultural communication behavior.

1. Introduction

The cultivation of students' intercultural communication competence is an important task in English teaching. The *English Curriculum Standard for Compulsory Education* issued in 2022 stipulates that English courses are supposed to “cultivate cultural awareness to enable students to compare the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, develop the ability of intercultural communication and form a healthy aesthetic taste and correct values.”^[1] With the development of globalization, China's international status continues to improve, and so does the demand for intercultural communication. Therefore, it is increasingly important to cultivate students' intercultural communication competence in English teaching in primary and secondary schools. However, most of the intercultural communication training in current English teaching only focuses on acquiring information of cultural differences while neglecting to train students' intercultural communication behaviors.

Therefore, this study explores to cultivate intercultural communication competence by incorporating into the entire progress of unit integrated teaching. Unit integrated teaching is widely accepted in the field of education in China. By learning in various classes in a unit, such as listening class, reading class, grammar class and writing class, students will go through a process: firstly understand the cultural differences between China and western countries in order to acquire intercultural communication knowledge; then cultivate intercultural communication awareness, and finally be able to behave and perform well in intercultural communication contexts and achieve the growth of intercultural communication competence. Based on this hypothesis, this study puts forward the following two research questions:

- (1) Whether the cultivation of intercultural communication competence can be carried out in the process of unit integrated teaching?
- (2) How to cultivate intercultural communication competence during unit integrated teaching?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Intercultural Communication Competence

2.1.1. Definition of Intercultural Communication Competence

Among the 574 core journals and CSSCI journals in CNKI on intercultural communication competence, there are 173 articles about higher education and 37 articles related to elementary education. It can be seen that the research on the cultivation of intercultural communication competence in primary and secondary schools is limited. It is true that college stage is the main stage to cultivate talents with intercultural communication ability. However, as China and the world become more and more closely related, cultivating students' intercultural communication competence should start from earlier stages.

As for the question of what is intercultural communication competence, Hu Wenzhong summed up the consensus of intercultural scholars, that is, the abilities of three aspects: cognition (knowledge), awareness (attitude) and behavior[2]. The cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence refers to communicators' knowledge of their own culture and other cultures, including information of politics, economy, geography, religion, humanities, customs, history, and so on. Intercultural awareness includes communicators' sensitivity to cultural differences, deep understanding of their own culture as well tolerance and respect for other different cultures. As for behavioral aspect, it is necessary for communicators to master various abilities such as verbal ability, non-verbal ability, flexible ability, psychological adjustment ability, as well as the abilities to deal with interpersonal relationships and do things in a different cultural environment[2].

2.1.2. Measures for Cultivating Intercultural Communication Competence

The literature on the cultivation of students' intercultural communication competence in middle school English teaching can be divided into two categories: one is to analyze how to construct a teaching environment suitable for the cultivation of intercultural communication competence from a macro level. For instance, Liu Qian explores to cultivate students' intercultural awareness with the assistance of both schools and parents [3]. Some researchers set up teaching models or theoretical frameworks to cultivate intercultural awareness from the macro aspects such as curriculum development and teacher training[4][5]. Take the *integrated model for Chinese students' intercultural competence development* (IMCSICD) as an example, it is based on the "4-3-2-1" framework, including four perspectives, three dimensions, two contexts and one platform, which aims to develop students' intercultural competence by creating a helpful environment[5].

The other is to explore how to cultivate intercultural communication awareness in daily teaching and classroom activities from a micro level. For example, the results of some studies show it is effective to cultivate intercultural communication awareness from different aspects, such as vocabulary, sentence patterns, reading teaching and extracurricular activities[6], or teaching content, teaching method, task design and evaluation method[7]. There is also research on the non-verbal intercultural communication, but it is limited to improving English teachers' non-verbal communication competence for students to imitate[8], rather than intentionally develop students' non-verbal communication competence. Some other researchers analyze the contents about intercultural communication in middle school English textbooks, and use task-based approach to explore how to further cultivate intercultural communication awareness among Chinese middle school students[9].

The measures mentioned above are either macro or micro; however, most of them are limited to the teaching of intercultural communication knowledge and the cultivation of intercultural communication awareness, while ignoring the training and development of students' intercultural communication behaviors. Only the integrated model IMCSICD takes into account

all the three aspects of students' intercultural communication competence: knowledge, awareness and behavior. In a word, the research on the cultivation of intercultural communication competence of middle school students is limited, and the existing research mainly focuses on students' knowledge and awareness of intercultural communication, while neglecting the cultivation and development of their intercultural communication behaviors. Therefore, new measures are needed to improve the current situation, and this study exposes to incooperate the cultivation of intercultural communication competence into the process of unit integrated teaching.

2.2. Unit integrated teaching

2.2.1. Theoretical Research on Unit integrated teaching

Unit integrated teaching is not a new invention. The concept of "integration" was first applied to teaching and curriculum theory at the end of the 19th century, in which Herbart first put forward the integration principle of apperception psychology. Unit integrated teaching is closely related to the concept of "whole language approach" proposed by Goodman in the 1980s. The article *What's Whole in Whole Language* elaborates the meaning of integration in holistic linguistics[10]. In his subsequent book Goodman pointed out the key to language teaching and constructed five fulcrums of language teaching as a whole: language, language learning, language teaching, course content, and community learning[11]. Carole Edelsky then gave a more in-depth explanation of the concept of unit integrated teaching. He believes that the language should be learned as a whole rather than divided into vocabulary, pronunciation, sentence patterns, and other parts[12]. In the late 1990s, there was research on "integrated thematic teaching", a teaching method similar with unit integrated teaching. It is believed that teachers should pay more attention to students' learning experience rather than results in the teaching process. And teachers should integrate and provide a variety of resources to help students learn and change passive learning into active learning in this process.

In the 1990s, the research on unit integrated teaching began in China. The combination of unit integrated teaching and big ideas is a new trend in recent years. Some experts in China believe that the theory of big idea provides theoretical support for re-examining and reconstructing unit teaching. According to Cui Chao, big idea is the core idea leading the reform of English unit teaching by functioning as the anchor of setting teaching objectives, the standard of selecting teaching content, the core of organizing the teaching process, and the basis of evaluating teaching effectiveness[13]. Li Songlin pointed out that unit integrated teaching is needed for both the cultivation of students' key competencies and the all-round development of students, and the big idea provides a new strategy and approach for unit integrated teaching. The big idea is a transferable structure with the triple meaning of epistemology, methodology and axiology, which determines that the big idea plays an integrated role in students' learning and development[14]. Wang Qiang expounds in detail on the big-idea-based unit integrated teaching. It means that teachers first interpret, analyze, integrate and reorganize teaching resources around the unit big idea, and then construct a complete unit instruction process dominated by unit big ideas, interrelated sub-ideas. It enables teachers to set goals around unit theme and guide students to generate big ideas by learning and constructing relationships between different small ideas in a single text[15].

2.2.2. Practical Research on Unit integrated teaching

As for how to make unit integrated teaching design, some researchers have proposed specific steps, such as the seven-step curriculum framework: selecting unit themes, defining big idea, determining key concepts, identifying main questions, writing unit objectives, developing teaching and learning activities and designing evaluation tools[16]. From Wang Qiang's view, unit integrated teaching follows three steps: (1)determining the big idea in order to grasp the teaching direction; (2)analyzing the discourse and excavating the core value based on the big

idea; (3) designing teaching activities based on the big idea, and selecting evaluation indicators[15]. Liu Hui believes that unit integrated teaching consists of three key steps: goal design, evaluation design and process design, during which the macro and micro ways of thinking should be combined to determine the goal. He emphasizes the importance of evaluating for learning, rather than evaluating only for evaluating. And the main questions should be the main line throughout the learning process of "preparation, construction and application" to guide students to think continuously[17].

It can be seen that the steps and frameworks of unit integrated teaching proposed by the above researchers are generally similar, all starting from determining big ideas according to the theme of the unit, and then designing teaching objectives, activities and evaluation plans. The main difference between each frame design is the degree of generalization. By carrying out diversified teaching activities, students can construct a coherent and integrated knowledge structure in the process of meaning exploration and problem solving[18]. In this way, students can gradually form unit big idea and obtain the integrated development of language competence, thinking quality, cultural awareness and other aspects. The development of intercultural communication competence is also a step-by-step process, following a sequence from information acquisition to awareness cultivation and finally practical application, which is consistent with the whole training procedures of unit integrated teaching. Therefore, the answer to the first research question is that students' intercultural communication competence can be cultivated in the process of English unit integrated teaching. The next part will explore how to cultivate intercultural communication competence during unit integrated teaching.

3. Cultivate Intercultural Communication Competence During Unit Integrated Teaching

In order to cultivate students' intercultural communication competence in the whole process of English unit integrated teaching, English teachers should be good at discovering and summarizing the intercultural knowledge embodied in textbooks, which shows all aspects of cultural differences between China and foreign countries. By gradually cultivating students' intercultural communication knowledge and attitude in the early stages of unit learning and practicing students' intercultural communication behaviors in the later stages of unit learning, students can apply what they have learned in intercultural communication contexts and achieve the overall development of intercultural communication competence. This study will take the teaching design of *Unit 5 Good Manners* from Grade 8, Volume 2, *Junior Middle School English Textbook* published by Yilin Press as an example to illustrate how to integrate the cultivation of intercultural communication competence in the process of unit integrated teaching as a whole.

3.1. Define unit big idea and the general goal of cultivating intercultural communication competence

The theme context of this unit is "Human and Society". The unit big idea is to abide by the etiquette in daily life, behave appropriately, learn and respect common social etiquette in Britain, and cultivate intercultural communication competence. The study of this unit requires seven class hours, including listening, reading, grammar, integrated skills, study skills and writing classes. Among them, the reading class needs two class hours.

Before teaching, teachers need to explore and summarize the intercultural communication content in the textbook and comprehensively master the unit teaching content. Then, set lesson goals and set layers of progressive teaching activities to develop students' intercultural communication competence.

3.2. Formulate lesson goals for cultivating intercultural communication competence

Unit integrated teaching requires teachers to set goals for each lesson according to the content of the textbook and unit big idea, which should reflect the layered progressive teaching activities so as to learn intercultural communication knowledge, cultivate intercultural communication awareness and practice intercultural communication behaviors. The following figure (Figure 1) shows the design of objectives of each lesson in this unit:

<i>Lessons</i>	<i>Teaching Objectives</i>
	Students will be able to:
<i>Lesson 1</i> <i>Welcome to the unit</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learn about all kinds of etiquette knowledge. 2. Talk about how to behave properly in public places. 3. Know the importance of forming good behaviors.
<i>Lesson 2-3</i> <i>Reading</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read the interview about British etiquette habits. 2. Understand the etiquette habits of different countries by reading. 3. Compare and summarize the common social etiquette in China and Britain. 4. Form cross-cultural communication awareness.
<i>Lesson 4</i> <i>Grammar</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use the phrase "enough to" to describe a person's quality and ability. 2. Use the phrase "too...to" to express a negative result.
<i>Lesson 5</i> <i>Integrated skills</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand the functions of different public signs by listening to the tape. 2. Use the information obtained from listening materials to complete a report. 3. Persuade others not to do something in English.
<i>Lesson 6</i> <i>Study skills</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand English proverbs. 2. Use English proverbs in the proper contexts.
<i>Lesson 7</i> <i>Task</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learn to outline before writing. 2. Complete articles about etiquette habits according to the outline. 3. Behave according to table manners and develop intercultural communication behaviors.

Figure 1. Design of teaching objectives

3.3. Design layered teaching activities to cultivate intercultural communication competence

3.3.1. Cultivate intercultural communication cognition and attitude in the early stage of unit learning

At the early stages of unit learning, there are input courses such as starting out class, listening class and reading class. The contents of listening materials are some etiquette in daily life and rules in public places. The reading materials are about common social etiquette in Britain, such

as greeting, opening topics, etiquette in public or at home, etc. At the beginning of this unit, teachers should add some background knowledge: there are many traditional daily etiquette in Britain and men in this country are famous for their decency while women are famous for their elegance and nobility. At the same time, teachers should guide students to pay attention to the cultural differences between Chinese and English social etiquette so as to help them learn intercultural communication knowledge and cultivate intercultural communication awareness. Most of the social etiquette between China and Britain is similar, but it is worth mentioning in this unit that, for example, British people will greet relatives or close friends with kisses, while the Chinese will not; British people often avoid topics such as age, weight and salary, but there are no strict taboos on topics such as age in China; In addition to public places, British people are also very polite at home, often saying "Thank you" and "Please" to their families, but in Chinese families we seldom say polite words such as "Thank you" and "Please", not because Chinese people are impolite but because these words show unfamiliarity to people who are close to us.

As there are only some basic social etiquette in Britain is presented in the textbook, it is necessary for teachers to design activities such as comparing British and Chinese social etiquette, so that they can actively pay attention to the differences between Chinese and English social etiquette so as to form a more systematic cognition of intercultural communication.

While guiding students to internalize intercultural communication knowledge, teachers should also guide students to understand the national character underlying reasons behind English etiquette, so as to tolerate and respect cultural differences, and cultivate intercultural communication awareness and emotional attitude. For instance, the grammar lesson in this unit requires students to learn to use the phrases "enough to" and "too...to". Teachers can use the topic of British etiquette to present students with the phrase of "too...to":

The teacher: "British people are very polite. They don't shout loudly in public."

The teacher: "They're too polite to shout loudly in public."

The teacher: "Also, British people won't push past you."

Students: "They're too polite to push past you."

In this way, students can learn the reasons behind etiquette while learning grammar, that is, the polite national character of the British. After understanding the reasons behind the phenomenon, students will be willing to behave according to British etiquette, which means their intercultural communication attitude or emotion is improving.

3.3.2. Cultivate intercultural communication behavior in the later stage of unit learning

In the output courses at the end of this unit, teachers can design activities such as role-playing, dialogue, story-making and performing for students to use intercultural communication knowledge while presenting or writing, so as to achieve the goal of cultivating their intercultural communication behaviors.

For example, teachers can design the following post-reading activities in lesson 3: a. The students work in groups of four. Each group makes a card called "English Etiquette habits". The content of the card is similar to what they have learned, which is divided into four aspects: how to greet, how to make conversations, etiquette in public places, and etiquette at home. Four students work together to complete the cards, each completing one aspect. More capable students can add more content to the card. b. After the students have finished the cards, the teacher asked each group to show the cards on the stage and make role-play according to British etiquette.

What's more, the Study Skills section of this unit is about English common proverbs. Teachers can design activities such as making up stories and performing to create opportunities for

students to internalize intercultural communication knowledge and pave the way for practicing behaviors: a. Students in groups of four, each group makes up stories around the topic of etiquette habits by using the proverbs learned Study Skills, such as “A cold hand and a warm heart”; “Birds of a feather flock together”; “Don't judge people by their appearance”, etc. The group that has an interesting plot and uses a lot of proverbs wins. b. Let the group representatives perform the stories they have written in turn, and the teachers will give some rewards to the groups with excellent performance.

In the writing class, teachers can also set up similar activities to exercise students' intercultural communication behaviors. The writing part of this unit requires students to make a web page for the table manner forum, including the name, purpose, time and place, content and summary of the forum. In the post-writing presentation, the teacher can set up the contexts and invite some students to act as British who are having dinner in order to exercise the students' table manners.

In addition, teachers should also pay attention to the cultivation of students' non-verbal communication behaviors. In daily communication, some non-verbal behaviors often represent specific meanings, such as gestures, facial expressions, clothing and so on. Culture and non-verbal communication are inseparable. The formation and effect of non-verbal communication are often determined by a certain cultural environment[19]. Non-verbal communication behaviors have different connotations in different countries. For example, British people will make eye contact when communicating, while in China, younger generations or subordinates should try to avoid looking directly at their elders or superiors. In China, silence in conversation can express either acquiescence or confrontation. Chinese people often keep silence when others are talking to show that they are listening attentively. It is polite not to interrupt the speaker. However, in western countries, silence often indicates that the listener is not interested in the conversation, so students are often encouraged to ask questions and participate actively in communication. What's more, Britain is a "low-body contact" country, so it is common to keeping a proper distance between people, at least 18cm. In restaurants, British people would rather wait a long time than share a table with strangers, while Chinese people often sit together to show intimacy[20]. Therefore, when students are performing British social etiquette or acting as British who are having dinner, teachers can give more information on the non-verbal communication behaviors in Britain, so that students can behave according to British manners.

3.4. Employ different ways of assessment to evaluate intercultural communication competence

Teachers should employ diversified ways of assessment, such as self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher assessment, as well as formative assessment and summative assessment, and evaluate the development of students' intercultural communication competence throughout the whole process of unit integrated teaching.

Students know themselves best, so it is necessary to design a self-assessment chart for students to not only help them reflect their own learning, but also help teachers get to know students' weaknesses so as to modify teaching plans. Teachers can design self-assessment checklist for each lesson as a means of summative assessment. The following figure (Figure 2) is a self-assessment checklist design of lesson 3.

Self-assessment checklist				
<i>Self-assessment</i>	<i>Excellent</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Needs improvement</i>
I am familiar with the introduction of British etiquette in the textbook.				
I can give a complete and detailed introduction to British etiquette.				
I can understand the differences in social etiquette between Chinese and English.				
I can behave properly according to British social etiquette.				
<i>My plans for improvement</i>				

Figure 2. Self-assessment checklist

Meanwhile, since some intercultural communication behaviors are not measurable, teachers need to observe while students are performing and give comments after their performance as materials for formative assessment.

4. Conclusion

With the increasing demand of intercultural communication talents, it is of increasing significance to cultivate students' intercultural communication competence. However, most of the researches on the cultivation of intercultural communication competence are aiming at the college stage while few studies at elementary education stages. At the same time, the previous literature is mostly about intercultural communication knowledge and awareness but few about the practice of intercultural communication behaviors.

Since the development of intercultural communication competence is consistent with the whole procedures of unit integrated teaching, intercultural communication competence can be cultivated in the process of English unit integrated teaching. As for the second research question: "How to cultivate intercultural communication competence during unit integrated teaching?" This study explores to cultivate students' intercultural communication competence in an all-round way throughout the whole process of unit integrated teaching. First of all, define unit big idea and the general goal of cultivating intercultural communication competence, in order to guide the teaching activities of the whole unit. Secondly, formulate lesson goals for cultivating intercultural communication competence, so that teachers can master the teaching steps of the whole unit. Thirdly, design layered teaching activities to develop students' intercultural communication cognition and attitude in the early stage of unit learning and then cultivate intercultural communication behavior in the later stage of unit learning. By designing various activities such as performing, role-playing, dialogue, story-making, teachers can create intercultural contexts for students to practice their intercultural communication behaviors. Finally, employ different ways of assessment to evaluate intercultural communication competence. Take students' self-assessment and teachers' classroom observation as the evidence of formative assessment to help students reflect on their own learning and help teachers revise the teaching plan in time.

This study is an exploration of promoting the all-round development of students' intercultural communication knowledge, awareness and behavior. In order to fulfill the needs of intercultural communication talents, more research is needed and more other strategies can be employed to cultivate students' intercultural communication competence.

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