

# Cultivating Intercultural Communicative Competence in Contemporary College English Teaching\*

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**ABSTRACT :** *In the context of globalization, developing intercultural communicative competence has become an essential goal of college English teaching. However, an overemphasis on language forms and examinations often leaves students unprepared for effective intercultural communication. This paper examines the concept and key components of intercultural communicative competence and analyzes the major constraints in its cultivation within college English teaching, including outdated teaching philosophy, limited teacher preparedness, insufficient teaching resources, and a lack of authentic intercultural contexts. In response, the study proposes a systematic reform path that integrates intercultural competence into teaching objectives, content design, instructional methods, assessment systems, and teacher development. By promoting a balanced integration of language learning and cultural education, college English teaching can better support the development of internationally minded graduates with cultural confidence and intercultural adaptability.*

**KEYWORDS** - *college English teaching, intercultural communicative competence, cultural awareness, language and culture integration, holistic education*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of deepening globalization and increasing cultural diversity, the interdependence and interaction among countries have intensified to an unprecedented degree. Economic globalization and cultural pluralism have made intercultural communicative competence (ICC) a new and essential requirement for high-quality talents in the twenty-first century (Chen Yulu, 2012). This global trend demands that contemporary college students not only acquire solid disciplinary knowledge, but also develop a broad global vision, profound multicultural awareness, advanced comprehensive language skills, and effective intercultural communicative competence. These competencies constitute the core attributes of internationally oriented talents and are closely related not only to individuals' developmental potential on the global stage, but also to a nation's strategic goals of enhancing cultural soft power and participating in global governance. Within this broader context, College English courses, one of the most widely offered and longest-duration public foundational courses in China's higher education system, have long transcended the traditional function of instrumental language training. They serve not only as a crucial channel for improving students' foreign language proficiency, but also as a natural and primary platform for fostering intercultural awareness and communicative competence. Scholars have increasingly emphasized that cultivating students' intercultural communicative competence should involve not only an understanding of Western cultures and values, but also the ability to communicate China's excellent traditional culture (Zhou Xueheng & Zhan Ju, 2016). Consequently, explicitly incorporating ICC cultivation into

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the core objectives of College English teaching and nurturing composite talents who can understand cultural differences, respect cultural diversity, and engage in appropriate and effective intercultural communication has become both an inevitable direction and an urgent task of College English teaching reform.

Since the introduction of intercultural communication studies into China in the 1980s, the field has undergone more than three decades of development in terms of theoretical introduction, disciplinary construction, and practical application, providing important frameworks and insights for foreign language education in China. The importance of cultivating intercultural communicative competence has gradually gained widespread recognition. However, a critical review of long-standing College English teaching practices reveals a persistent problem: instructional emphasis remains largely placed on the transmission of linguistic knowledge (such as vocabulary and grammar) and the mechanical training of discrete skills including listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. This instrumental-rationality-oriented approach tends to treat language as an isolated system of symbols, while neglecting the cultural meanings embedded in language and the strategic competence required for language use in authentic intercultural contexts. As a result, many students, despite achieving high scores in language proficiency tests, may still encounter cultural misunderstandings, communicative failures, or even develop stereotypes and prejudices when engaged in real intercultural interactions, thus failing to achieve effective, appropriate, and in-depth communication. Specifically, the major problems in the cultivation of ICC in current College English teaching can be summarized as follows. First, cultural instruction is often fragmented and static, largely confined to superficial introductions of factual cultural knowledge about target-language countries (such as festivals and customs), with insufficient systematic comparison and dynamic analysis of underlying values, modes of thinking, and interactional norms. Second, teaching practices tend to prioritize input over output and interaction, providing students with more opportunities to passively receive cultural information than to actively construct meaning and negotiate communicative problems in simulated or authentic intercultural situations. Third, assessment systems fail to align effectively with competence-oriented goals, as they continue to focus primarily on linguistic accuracy while lacking reliable instruments to evaluate students' cultural sensitivity, communicative strategies, and empathic ability. These issues significantly weaken the effectiveness of College English courses in fulfilling their educational objectives.

In view of the above, this paper aims to explore pathways for reforming College English teaching from the perspective of intercultural communicative competence cultivation. It first reviews the core concepts and constituent elements of ICC, and then systematically analyzes the major constraints that hinder its development in current College English teaching. On this basis, the paper attempts to construct a theoretical and practical framework that integrates ICC cultivation into the College English curriculum, addressing the reconstruction of teaching philosophy, the integration and deepening of teaching content, the innovation of instructional methods, and the diversification of assessment systems. This study seeks to provide theoretical support and practical insights for promoting a paradigm shift in College English teaching from a "language-centered" approach to one that gives equal weight to language and intercultural competence, ultimately contributing to the cultivation of high-quality talents equipped with both a strong sense of Chinese cultural identity and a global outlook in the era of globalization.

## II. AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPT OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

ICC constitutes a multidimensional and integrated system of abilities whose theoretical connotations have been continuously enriched through ongoing scholarly dialogue in the context of globalization. Scholars have defined and deconstructed ICC from diverse perspectives, collectively revealing its essential integration of theory and practice. Ting-Toomey (2007) conceptualizes intercultural communicative competence as an approach that integrates theory with practice, enabling communicators to use intercultural knowledge in a sensitive and mindful manner. This definition highlights three key elements: theoretical guidance, practical integration, and conscious awareness, suggesting that ICC is not merely a set of behavioral techniques, but rather a reflective communicative practice grounded in systematic knowledge. It requires communicators to flexibly mobilize relevant knowledge

while maintaining a high level of sensitivity to, and continuous reflection on, both their own and others' cultural positionalities.

Lussier (2007) proposes a three-dimensional theoretical model that provides a more systematic framework for understanding intercultural communicative competence. This model conceptualizes ICC as comprising three interrelated components: intercultural knowledge, intercultural skills, and intercultural being. The dimension of intercultural knowledge encompasses a systematic understanding of both one's own culture and other cultures, including explicit facts and implicit norms. It covers surface cultural phenomena such as customs, etiquette, and institutions, as well as deeper cultural structures such as values, modes of thinking, and interactional norms, thereby forming the cognitive foundation of competence development. The dimension of intercultural skills refers to the ability to effectively apply such knowledge in authentic intercultural contexts, including verbal and nonverbal communication skills, the interpretation and inference of cultural meanings, strategies of adaptation and adjustment, as well as conflict management and negotiation. This dimension represents the crucial transformation from cognition to practice. The dimension of intercultural being emphasizes the cultivation of learners' internal dispositions, including openness and inclusiveness, empathy, tolerance of ambiguity, self-reflexivity, and motivation for lifelong learning. These affective and attitudinal qualities provide the personal and emotional foundation that ensures the stable enactment of intercultural competence. Lussier's model thus reveals that the essence of ICC cultivation lies in the organic integration of language, thought, and culture. Language is not merely a tool for communication, but a core carrier of culture and an externalization of worldview; culture, in turn, subtly shapes individuals' cognitive patterns and communicative behaviors through language.

These theoretical insights have directly influenced and reshaped the goal orientation of foreign language education. Lipan Lv and Liming Yu (2021) point out that foreign language teaching should not only transmit linguistic knowledge, but, more importantly, cultivate students' communicative competence, particularly their ability to engage in intercultural communication through foreign languages. This implies that College English teaching must transcend traditional language-structure-centered approaches and elevate its instructional objectives from mastery of correct linguistic forms to the realization of effective intercultural communication, thereby ensuring that language learning ultimately serves the broader goal of intercultural understanding and cooperation.

In China, the understanding and practice of intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education have undergone a profound evolution. Early research and pedagogical practices (from the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first century) primarily focused on introducing target-language cultures into foreign language instruction, with the aim of helping students overcome communication barriers caused by cultural differences and better comprehend social behaviors and textual meanings in target-language societies. This "one-way input" model played an important historical role in broadening students' international perspectives and enhancing their understanding of specific cultures. However, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the acceleration of bidirectional global flows and the rise of China's international standing, scholars have engaged in critical reflection on this approach. It has become increasingly evident that an exclusive emphasis on target-language cultures risks the loss of cultural subjectivity and results in communicative asymmetry. Consequently, the bidirectionality of intercultural communication has gradually emerged as a dominant scholarly consensus. This shift signifies that the ideal cultivation of intercultural communicative competence must encompass both an in-depth understanding of target cultures and a conscious awareness of, as well as the ability to effectively articulate, one's own culture. Teaching should guide students, through comparison and dialogue between Chinese and Western cultures, not only to "enter" the cultural worlds of others, but also to "step out" and articulate Chinese narratives clearly and confidently, thereby fostering their role awareness as equal and responsible participants in intercultural dialogue. This paradigm shift from "one-way transmission" to "bidirectional construction" reflects a deepening of academic understanding and points to the fundamental direction of contemporary College English teaching reform.

### **III. MAJOR BOTTLENECKS IN THE CULTIVATION OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING**

Integrating intercultural education concepts into College English teaching plays a significant role in enhancing students' comprehensive language proficiency, deepening global understanding, and fostering intercultural dialogic competence. In an era marked by increasingly frequent global interactions, cultivating students' intercultural sensitivity and adaptability has become an essential mission of higher education. However, current teaching practices still face a series of deep-rooted contradictions and structural problems when attempting to systematically integrate language skills training with intercultural competence development. These challenges substantially constrain the full realization of instructional objectives. Specifically, the major bottlenecks are manifested in the following aspects.

#### **1. Imbalanced Teaching Philosophy: Emphasis on Linguistic Knowledge over Intercultural Awareness**

To a large extent, College English teaching has yet to break away from a model dominated by instrumental rationality. Instructional focus is still largely placed on the explanation of formal linguistic knowledge, such as vocabulary and grammar, as well as targeted training in discrete skills including listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. Teaching and assessment systems are closely tied to this orientation, with excessive emphasis placed on students' performance in standardized tests such as CET-4 and CET-6. This exam-oriented approach shapes students' learning motivation in a predominantly utilitarian manner, directing their efforts toward test preparation and the improvement of measurable language skills rather than toward the development of intercultural understanding and communicative competence. Consequently, classroom practices tend to become homogeneous, relying primarily on teacher-centered instruction and text-based analysis, while interactive tasks that promote cultural comparison, value reflection, and contextualized communication are largely absent. As a result, students may acquire what is often referred to as "correct English" in terms of linguistic accuracy, yet remain insufficiently sensitive to what constitutes "appropriate English" in intercultural contexts and to the cultural logic underpinning language use. Intercultural competence cultivation is thus seriously marginalized in actual teaching practice, reducing College English courses to instruments of linguistic training rather than platforms for intercultural learning.

#### **2. Constraints in Teacher Competence: The Need to Deepen Intercultural Theoretical Awareness and Pedagogical Practice**

Teachers serve as the key facilitators of intercultural learning. At present, many College English teachers possess a relatively rich knowledge base concerning English-speaking cultures and are capable of introducing students to customs, history, and social phenomena in target-language societies. However, as Dodd (2006) points out, within the disciplinary framework of intercultural communication, culture encompasses a complex and interrelated system of group identity, beliefs, values, activities, norms, customs, communicative styles, and institutional structures. Such a holistic understanding of culture requires teachers not only to master cultural facts, but also to grasp the underlying structural relationships and dynamic nature of cultural systems.

In practice, many teachers lack systematic theoretical training and in-depth understanding of the multidimensional nature of intercultural communicative competence itself, including its cognitive, behavioral, affective, and attitudinal dimensions, as well as the principles governing its development. This limitation in theoretical awareness often results in classroom instruction that remains confined to the transmission of cultural information, rather than guiding students toward deeper cultural comparison, critical reflection, and identity negotiation. For instance, when introducing Western festivals, teachers may focus primarily on surface-level elements such as dates, foods, and activities, without encouraging students to explore the underlying values, social relationships, and cultural identities reflected in these practices. Moreover, in instructional design, teachers frequently experience uncertainty regarding how to operationalize intercultural objectives, making it difficult to translate abstract competence goals into coherent, progressive classroom activities and assessment schemes. This lack of clarity undermines both the systematic nature and the effectiveness of intercultural competence cultivation.

As a result, students are rarely supported in developing a structured and dynamic understanding of culture, which is essential for meaningful and sustainable intercultural communication.

### **3. Insufficient Teaching Resources and Contextual Support: Limited Textbook Support and the Absence of Authentic Communicative Settings**

The lag in updating teaching resources and the lack of authentic communicative contexts constitute objective constraints on the development of intercultural competence. On the one hand, the overall structure and content of many widely used College English textbooks still revolve primarily around linguistic functions, grammatical items, and conventional topics. The systematic introduction of intercultural communication concepts, in-depth design of cultural comparison tasks, and sustained engagement with global issues remain notably insufficient. As a result, these materials fail to provide a coherent and forward-looking content framework to support intercultural teaching. As Weimin Zhang and Hongmei Zhu (2002) have observed, a major reason why Chinese learners of foreign languages are unable to express culturally specific aspects of Chinese culture effectively in English lies in the fact that English teaching contains very limited Chinese cultural content. This problem persists in the current textbook system, leading intercultural instruction to focus predominantly on the one-way input of target-language culture while neglecting systematic training in articulating local culture in English. On the other hand, the teaching environment itself is characterized by a high degree of “homogeneity.” Students’ daily communicative interactions are largely confined to domestic teachers and peers, with limited opportunities for sustained and authentic engagement with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. The scarcity of such intercultural communicative practice prevents students from applying what they have learned in real contexts, managing misunderstandings, and adjusting communicative strategies dynamically. Consequently, intercultural competence development becomes detached from lived experience and remains largely theoretical. The limitations of textbook content and the lack of authentic practice opportunities mutually reinforce each other, jointly constraining the development of students’ bidirectional cultural expression abilities and their capacity for genuine intercultural communication.

## **IV. Reform Pathways and Implementation Strategies for College English Teaching from an Intercultural Communication Perspective**

In response to the practical challenges facing the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence, College English teaching urgently requires systematic restructuring and the establishment of a competence-oriented training framework that places intercultural communication at its core and permeates the entire instructional process. Such a framework must not only articulate clear educational objectives at the macro level, but also develop mutually reinforcing implementation pathways in curriculum design, teaching methods, assessment mechanisms, and faculty development.

### **1. Updating Teaching Philosophy: From Instrumentalism to Holistic Education**

A fundamental shift in teaching philosophy constitutes the primary prerequisite for reform. College English instruction must move decisively from a traditional “language-as-tool” orientation toward a holistic educational paradigm. This shift entails transcending a narrow focus on linguistic accuracy and systematically constructing a multidimensional competence framework encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical awareness. At the cognitive level, students should develop a deep understanding of similarities and differences between Chinese and Western cultures in terms of values, modes of thinking, and social norms, as well as the historical and social factors underlying cultural phenomena. At the skills level, students need to flexibly employ linguistic and non-linguistic strategies in simulated or authentic intercultural contexts to communicate effectively, negotiate meaning, and manage conflict. At the attitudinal level, instruction should foster openness, respect for cultural diversity, and empathy. At the level of awareness, the ultimate goal is to cultivate students’ critical cultural

consciousness, enabling them to reflect on their own cultural positioning and to form a balanced and confident cultural identity in intercultural dialogue. The establishment of this goal system provides clear direction for subsequent teaching practices.

## **2. Integrating and Reconstructing Teaching Content**

Based on these objectives, teaching content must undergo deep integration and systematic reconstruction. The prevailing model of adding cultural knowledge points should be replaced by a structured approach to intercultural competence development. Textbook systems need to be optimized through the development or selection of materials that organically integrate intercultural communication theories into language instruction, with systematic designs for cultural comparison, authentic case analysis, and reflective tasks. Curriculum structures should move beyond a single-track model and adopt a flexible “core course + module-based courses” system. While ensuring solid foundational language training, elective modules such as Intercultural Communication in Practice, English Discussion of Global Issues, and Comparative Studies of Chinese and Western Societies can be offered to meet students’ diverse developmental needs. Teaching resource construction is equally critical. Institutions should establish intercultural case databases and digital platforms containing rich authentic materials, including international news, films and television programs, business interviews, and social media discourse. Particular emphasis should be placed on teaching students how to explain Chinese culture accurately and appropriately in English, thereby cultivating their bidirectional cultural narrative competence. As Changjiang Liu (2003) argues, intercultural competence development in foreign language teaching should pursue the parallel integration of target-language culture and native culture, since genuine intercultural competence can only be achieved through a balanced engagement with both.

## **3. Innovating Teaching Methods and Learning Modalities**

Innovation in teaching methods is the key to translating educational philosophy into practice and to realizing effective competence development. Traditional teacher-centered, one-way transmission models must give way to student-centered experiential, inquiry-based, and collaborative learning approaches. This transformation should systematically incorporate Liddicoat’s (2004) four-dimensional framework for cultural pedagogy, namely cultural learning, cultural comparison, cultural exploration, and intercultural mediation. Teachers should design tasks grounded in authentic intercultural communicative needs. For example, collaborative projects in which students produce a local living guide for international students require not only systematic cultural learning but also position students as cultural mediators during information collection, organization, and presentation. Similarly, simulated international business negotiations enable students to engage in cultural comparison and dynamic exploration of communicative norms while managing cultural differences and communicative challenges. Role-playing and situational simulations provide relatively safe classroom environments in which students can experience cultural conflict and practice communication strategies. Long-term project-based learning, such as comparative studies of workplace etiquette in China and abroad, encourages sustained and systematic inquiry. Digital technologies further expand intercultural learning spaces by overcoming geographical constraints. Virtual exchange programs and online collaborative communities can create authentic intercultural interaction opportunities with global partners. In addition, reflective practices embedded throughout the learning process, such as intercultural journals and cultural incident analyses, promote the internalization and deepening of cultural understanding, gradually fostering the cognitive habits and sense of agency required of intercultural mediators.

## **4. Reforming Assessment Mechanisms**

To align with new teaching objectives and methods, assessment systems must undergo fundamental reform. Traditional written examinations that prioritize linguistic accuracy are inadequate for evaluating

intercultural communicative competence. A new assessment framework should emphasize diversity, process orientation, and developmental value. Assessment content should incorporate cultural sensitivity, appropriateness of communicative strategies, and adaptability in intercultural contexts as core criteria. Assessment methods should combine portfolio assessment, collecting project outcomes, reflective journals, and interaction records; performance-based assessments in contextualized tasks; and triangulated feedback from self-assessment, peer assessment, and where possible, external evaluators such as international partners. The central concern of this system lies in tracking students' developmental trajectories rather than rendering static judgments on final outcomes.

### **5. Strengthening Faculty Development and Expanding Practice Ecologies**

The successful implementation of any pedagogical reform ultimately depends on teacher professionalism. Systematic faculty development support is therefore indispensable. Universities should establish comprehensive mechanisms to enhance teachers' intercultural teaching competence by organizing workshops on theoretical advances in intercultural communication, training programs in intercultural curriculum design, and opportunities for overseas observation and exchange. On campus, intercultural teaching research communities can be formed to encourage collaborative lesson planning, classroom observation, and action research. Institutional policy and resource support, such as funding for material development and participation in major international conferences, are also essential to enable teachers to accumulate firsthand intercultural experience and global perspectives.

Finally, intercultural competence cultivation must extend beyond the physical classroom to encompass an open, diverse, and authentic practice ecology. Universities should actively develop "second" and "third" classrooms by hosting international cultural festivals, intercultural lecture series, and multilingual language corners to foster a vibrant internationalized campus atmosphere. At the same time, off-campus practice platforms should be expanded through partnerships with multinational corporations, international NGOs, and foreign-affairs institutions, providing students with internship and volunteer opportunities in real professional and social settings. While overseas exchange programs remain important, the development of high-quality online international collaborative learning projects offers a cost-effective and widely accessible alternative. Digital platforms can further support sustained, theme-based intercultural interaction, integrating intercultural learning into students' everyday lives.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

In the context of deepening globalization, cultivating high-quality talents with strong intercultural communicative competence has become a central mission of College English education. Through a systematic analysis of current practices and challenges, this study identifies persistent problems in teaching philosophy, content design, methodological innovation, resource construction, and faculty development. To ensure the effective implementation of intercultural competence cultivation, comprehensive and coordinated reforms are required: establishing an intercultural competence-oriented goal system; constructing curricula that integrate language training and cultural development; innovating student-centered experiential and inquiry-based teaching methods; developing diversified, process-oriented assessment mechanisms; strengthening faculty development and expanding authentic intercultural practice platforms.

These measures are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, forming an integrated cultivation system. Deepening the integration of intercultural competence development with College English teaching not only enhances students' overall English proficiency, but also fosters their cultural understanding, adaptability, and communicative effectiveness in international contexts. This reform is both an inevitable response to contemporary educational demands and an important contribution to national talent development strategies. Future research and practice should continue to explore intercultural teaching models that align with China's educational context,

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enabling College English education to serve as a vital platform for cultivating globally minded, interculturally competent, and culturally confident talents for the new era.

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