

Reforming English Writing Instruction in the Context of Intercultural Communication: A Case Study

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Abstract: *The study conducted a one-year teaching reform of English writing courses for English majors in a university in the context of intercultural communication. The results are expected to provide instructive and practical suggestions for both students' and teachers' skills development.*

Keywords: *English writing, Intercultural communication, University students, Case study*

1. Introduction

Globalization has led to interdependency between countries and enhancing students' international mobility has become one of the main axes of higher education development in this context, connecting intercultural and international instruction. In the field of foreign language teaching, teachers and researchers agree on the importance of acquiring intercultural communicative competences. There is no such thing as a completely culturally isolated language, and it is difficult to learn a language without understanding its cultural context and differences between cultures. In communication activities, from personal interactions with culturally different people to foreign affairs between countries, customs need to be respected and used appropriately as they reflect various social constructions or conventions [1][2][3][4][5][6].

College English instruction leads to better marks but often neglects the transmission of target cultural knowledge and the cultivation of practical intercultural communication skills. If one lacks the cultural background knowledge and skills needed for intercultural communication, it is difficult to adapt to the needs of modern society. College English composition courses aim to develop students' ability to express their thoughts and feelings in writing for work and socializing purposes, as well as to familiarize them with various writing styles. Specifically, students should learn how to choose words and phrases and how to compose paragraphs among other things and, as such, master writing methods, techniques, and rhetorical devices. However, as writing courses are seldom the focus of students' language learning, teachers are unable to correct a large number of assignments. There is insufficient practice during and after class, so students are significantly less motivated and engaged in English writing.

In addition, the content of these courses emphasizes the knowledge of British and American cultures, and the overall curriculum planning fails to properly guide students to understand multiculturalism and differences from their native culture, neglecting the formation of relevant attitudes. Byram (1997) pointed out that English learners who target the Anglo-American culture cannot engage in substantive intercultural communication and do not meet the requirements of using English as a lingua franca in multilingual and multicultural contexts [7]. According to Byram's model of intercultural communication, relevant competences include attitudes, knowledge, interpretation and association, discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Taking this model as a reference, EFL teachers should not only enhance students' knowledge of multiculturalism but also lead them to observe similarities and differences between cultures, including the British and American ones, from their own perspective, to respect and understand multiculturalism, and to be able to manage intercultural conflicts.

This study aimed to achieve the following objectives through a reform of intercultural communication curriculum: (1) to strengthen students' English writing skills, and (2) to enhance students' intercultural communication skills. To this end, it proposes adopting the integrated curriculum design promoted by Fink (2013), whereby active learning activities assist students in acquiring key learning experiences, with an emphasis on the interactive integration of learning objectives, instructional activities, assessment, and feedback [8]. The reform was designed to help students acquire self-sustainable learning skills by

understanding and applying their knowledge to various English writing and intercultural contexts, making connections to their lives, learning to communicate with themselves and others, and focusing on changing attitudes, interests, and values.

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- (1) How can instructors effectively teach English writing?
- (2) How can students strengthen their intercultural communication skills through writing courses?
- (3) How can a writing course enhance students' willingness to be active and lifelong language learners?

2. Materials and methods

We offered one-year English writing courses (Basic English Writing II and Advanced English Writing) to 46 students in the English Department of a university in Guangdong Province, China in the context of intercultural communication. To strengthen students' English writing and intercultural communication competences, the courses were based on active learning-oriented activities. Participants did not merely absorb and memorize knowledge but also became more involved through experiences and reflection. These experiences included imitation, observation, and practical work. Learners were able to reflect through dialogue with teachers or peers, and teachers could also ask questions to help them engage in critical reflection. To sharpen their writing skills, students explored specific topics in different contexts and completed tasks both individually and in small groups. In terms of intercultural communication skills, they started by observing events in multicultural contexts and referred to Deardorff's (2004) four-step model (observe, state, explore, and evaluate) to think outside of their native culture and respond appropriately in intercultural communication^[9].

The courses aimed to acquaint students with multiculturalism from a local perspective through a wide range of contents, to systematically link knowledge, and to have students apply it in the face of intercultural development and challenges. As such, in addition to the prescribed textbooks, the courses were supplemented with texts and writing reference resources related to intercultural communication, multiculturalism, and globalization issues. Topics of discussion included cultural customs, trade, and tourism.

In terms of assignments and tests, students' performance in vocabulary acquisition, phrase and paragraph writing, peer review and reflection were examined, and students were required to maintain a learning portfolio to allow for their progress and effectiveness to be evaluated. Their reflection records and learning history were analyzed and compared with Byram's (1997) assessment of learners' attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness, so as to understand the differences between their intercultural communication skills before and after the courses.

In short, the reformed writing courses were conducted based on the integrated curriculum design proposed by Fink (2013) to promote intercultural communication. The main learning objectives of the courses were to enhance learners' English writing skills, strengthen their intercultural literacy, guide them to connect their own experiences through a wide range of cognitive understanding. Such reformed activities led students to connect with their own experiences through a wide range of cognitive understandings, and then go deeper into professional knowledge and further connect with the diverse knowledge and life experiences they have learned for lifelong learning.

We also devised a questionnaire survey and assessment of learning effectiveness at the end of the courses. The questions were mainly closed-ended, supplemented by open-ended ones. The survey data were tallied and analyzed using SPSS statistical software.

3. Teaching activities

The teaching activities included three stages, namely, pre-class preparation, in-class discussion, and post-class practice. The first step, pre-class preparation, involved intercultural film appreciation. The teacher assigned a learning task before class and students watched a film related to material or intercultural communication. They then had to write a 200-word summary of its content. This process was designed to provide learners with indirect material for intercultural experiences, and to enable them to extract the relevant knowledge and skills for such interactions.

The second step, in-class discussion, was the introduction and discussion of language, discourse, and

culture. Taking job hunting as an example, first, an instructor introduced the topic and emphasized the relevant vocabulary and phrases as well as its cultural dimensions. Second, students read and answered questions to ensure text comprehension. This session focused on their training in reading strategies and cultural exploration of language comprehension. Learners then shared their observations within and between groups to identify cultural similarities and differences. This instruction enabled them to compare, analyze, and summarize cultural particularities of job hunting through discussion. Finally, each group gave an oral presentation of the film they had watched and of the job-hunting characteristics in different cultures. This session was designed to develop students' abilities to observe, state, explore, and evaluate in the sense of Deardorff's model (2004).

The third step, post-class practice, consisted of assignments and tests. The instructor examined the vocabulary, phrases, paragraph writing, peer review, reflective insights, and oral reporting performance that students had acquired related to the chosen topic (e.g., job-hunting culture). They were guided to learn to communicate with others, focus on their own attitudes, interests, and values, and acquire self-perpetual learning skills by writing reflective insights. They were encouraged to use the Internet after class to retrieve information related to the topic in different cultures for additional credit. This instruction was designed to provide learners with a relatively authentic intercultural experiential context. This step covers relevant writing knowledge and skills, as well as multicultural awareness, providing students with opportunities to practice writing and encouraging active learning, discussion and experiences sharing on topics such as Eastern and Western cultures, with the hope that this will help students to communicate in English with people from different cultures.

4. Results and discussion

The questionnaire that stressed students' learning experience and effectiveness reflected on learners' mastery of English writing, intercultural communication knowledge, and connection to their own life experiences. A total of 46 questionnaires were distributed, and 40 valid questionnaires were returned, after excluding invalid ones with regular responses. A 5-point Likert scale was used to score participants' agreement with statements about their learning effectiveness and satisfaction: 1 for "strongly agree," 2 for "agree," 3 for "no opinion," 4 for "disagree," and 5 for "strongly disagree." The statistical results are shown in Table 1:

Table 1: The statistical analysis of learning effectiveness and satisfaction

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sample
(1) The courses are helpful for developing English writing skills.	4.10	0.67	40
(2) The courses are helpful for learning to communicate interculturally.	4.20	0.61	40
(3) I will be able to connect what I have learned with my life experiences; learn to communicate with myself and others; change my attitudes, interests, and values; and acquire autonomous learning skills.	4.03	0.36	40
(4) Overall, I am satisfied with the courses.	4.28	0.51	40

As shown in Table 1, in the questionnaire survey, learning satisfaction reached 4.28. From students' feedback, we can see that the curriculum reform has had a positive effect. In response to the open-ended question, three students wrote:

"The film or footage at the beginning of the class is very helpful for learning English. It makes the class interesting, and the words and phrases to learn can be remembered easily."

"The section about comparison and contrast in learning intercultural communication is enlightening and valuable for me."

"At first, I had a vague understanding of intercultural communication, but after class this has become much clearer."

This indicates that the students have a positive attitude toward the course, at least in terms of intercultural communication.

Crucially, how intercultural communication can be integrated into the English course is also valuable in enhancing teaching skills and quality. Globalization has made intercultural communication a

significant goal of English teaching, which poses new challenges to teachers. Accordingly, how to help them understand, reflect on, and improve their own intercultural communication competences is a top priority in teacher training and development. This study can provide effective insights for the pre- and in-service training of English teachers.

In addition to the benefits yielded by the current reformed courses, the following suggestions are made to enhance the competence and performance of teachers and students alike in intercultural communication ^{[10][11][12]}.

Advanced multimedia devices have become critical instruments used in the university classroom. Multimedia information offers students more content to learn and makes it easier for them to understand multiculturalism. Multimedia activities encourage students to work in groups, express their knowledge in a variety of ways, solve problems, and develop knowledge. By participating in multimedia activities, students can learn real-world skills related to technology, as well as the techniques for synthesizing and analyzing complex content. There are many multimedia resources available today for students to learn and utilize, such as Adobe Spark, Book Creator, and iMovie.

Foreign language courses can improve students' intercultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity via interactive activities. Classroom interaction emphasizes cooperation between teachers and students and between students and students. For example, rehearsal can be done by having learners act out the videos they have watched to ensure that they understand their meaning and message. Such practice is a foundation for students' social interaction that promotes their adaptability.

Additional actions that can improve students' intercultural communication competences can be having them engage in role plays, employing foreign instructors, or holding language and culture salons. After school, teachers can lead students in volunteer activities to aid foreign friends as a way to further develop their intercultural communication skills.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the application of intercultural communication and integrated curriculum design in the innovative reform of English writing courses for university English majors. Admittedly, the design of the questionnaire in this study was slightly simplified, and it was not administered before and after the reform to demonstrate students' learning increased effectiveness after taking the courses. These limitations can be addressed by future research. In the future, it is expected that the participants will be able to improve their language proficiency and intercultural communication competences in a more holistic way and to change their attitudes toward learning with the goal of acquiring self-sustainable learning skills.

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