

# The Cross-cultural Education in College English Language Teaching

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**Abstract:** *As is known to all, culture is a very complex social phenomenon, and every country has its own unique culture. Culture also contains the elements of language. In the process of learning a language, if we want to understand and use the language correctly, we must understand the culture of the language. Nowadays, the cultural difference between China and the west has become one of the stumbling blocks in college students' English learning process. This paper analyzes the differences between Chinese and Western cultures in communication and the problems existing in the cultivation of students' cross-cultural communication competence in current college English teaching, and puts forward the strategies for the cross-cultural education, aiming at improving the cross-cultural communication competence of contemporary college students and providing references for future relevant studies.*

**Keywords:** *Cross-cultural education; Cultural difference in communication; College English Language Teaching; Problems and Strategies*

## 1. Introduction

Cross-cultural communication refers to the process in which people with different cultural backgrounds engage in communication, including communication between people from different countries, nationalities, genders, ages, occupations, regions, etc. This kind of communication is mainly carried out through language, and it is necessary to pay attention to the differences in language and cultural background for proper communication. We all say that language is the carrier of culture, and language teaching is closely related to the cross-cultural education.

In recent years, more and more people pay attention to the cultivation of students' cross-cultural competence in English language teaching. With the accelerated pace of reform and opening up, foreign exchanges are becoming more frequent and exchanges between countries are becoming more extensive. In this information age, the Internet makes people involved in cross-cultural communication without leaving home. After China's successful entry into the WTO, the large demand of the international market for compound talents who can communicate proficiently and effectively in English poses new challenges to foreign language teaching, so it is of practical significance to cultivate cross-cultural communication ability. In addition, strengthening cross-cultural education can promote the development of English teaching. Due to the different social culture, the language expression forms of people all over the world are also different to some extent. In the cross-cultural communication environment, cultural conflict caused by lack of cultural cognition has become a common phenomenon. According to statistics, cultural errors occur far more frequently than linguistic errors. Language mistakes can at most lead to inexpressiveness and inability to clearly express one's inner thoughts, while cultural mistakes often lead to serious misunderstandings between the two sides of cross-cultural communication. Only with certain cross-cultural communication ability can we effectively avoid such communication barriers caused by cultural differences. Therefore, integrating cross-cultural education into college English teaching can not only improve students' English expression ability, but also enable students to have a certain cognition of English culture.<sup>[1]</sup> Moreover, the combination of English teaching and cross-cultural education can also broaden students' horizons, deepen their knowledge reserve, and help students improve their comprehensive ability of using English.

## 2. The Differences between Chinese and Western Cultures in Communication

In today's multicultural world, cultural differences are inevitable. In the process of learning English, understanding the culture of western countries can lay a good foundation for effective cross-cultural

communication activities. The cultural differences between China and the west in communication are reflected in many aspects.

### ***2.1 Differences in Customs and Habits***

People in different regions have different lifestyles, so there are great differences in customs and habits, which are mainly reflected in etiquette, literature and art, politics, economy and religion. In terms of life etiquette, there are great differences between China and the west in greeting manner, taboos, code words and slang. For example, in China, people will ask each other about their marital status, age and so on when they contact for the first time, which is to show their concern for each other. However, in western countries where individualism is highly valued, this behavior will arouse people's aversion, because they think these things are personal privacy and it is impolite to talk about them.<sup>[1]</sup> Besides in China, sometimes people will ask about the price of some items when they visit their friends, which is a normal behavior, but in the west, this behavior is not allowable. Of course, there are some behaviors that seem reasonable to people in the west but seem wrong to people in China. Take receiving gifts as an example, people in western countries are used to open gifts in front of guests and praise them, but Chinese people generally do not open gifts immediately after receiving them, because it is regarded by others as a greedy behavior.<sup>[2]</sup>

### ***2.2 Differences in Pragmatics***

Different sentences have different pragmatic meanings in different cultural backgrounds. A fluent oral speaker will also fail in cross-cultural communication if he or she makes pragmatic mistakes. The pragmatic communion in the daily life of Chinese people and westerners reflect the pragmatic differences between English and Chinese.<sup>[1]</sup> For example, in China, it is customary for acquaintances to ask: "Have you had your dinner?" after meeting each other. But in western countries, this question has a different effect. The other person will think you want to invite him or her to have dinner. Westerners like to talk about weather, traffic and hobbies when meeting each other. For example, they may say: "What a nice day it is." Moreover, Chinese people sometimes say "You look thinner" or "You don't look so good" when they meet each other, which is to show concern for the other person's health, whereas in the west, people will be angry when hearing these words because it is impolite to say so. Speaking of compliments, Chinese and western people are different in the use of compliments. Western culture puts a lot of emphasis on "personality".<sup>[3]</sup> Therefore, comments about one's appearance dominate the content of compliments. The recipients of such compliments are mostly women, and women often receive compliments from men, which is nothing wrong with westerners.<sup>[3]</sup> However in China, mutual praise between the opposite sex is a taboo because it would be seen as frivolous and inappropriate. There are also pragmatic differences between China and the west in table manners. Chinese people are hospitable and always like to prepare a large table of dishes for guests. But no matter how rich the dishes are, they will always say that their homemade dishes do not taste very good because they want to show their modesty. However, when westerners hear the host say this, they may get angry and think that the host is deliberately trying to treat them to a bad meal. Also, in China, in order to show politeness, the host would say to the guests: "You should eat more". This seems impolite in the west because westerners respect individual will.

### ***2.3 Differences in the Meanings of Words***

In the process of interaction between language and culture, some words are given unique meanings.

#### ***2.3.1 The meaning of animals***

As we all know, "dragon" in Chinese traditional culture is a symbol of nobility and power, but also symbolizes success while in the eyes of western people, it stands for evil. In China, many ancient buildings are engraved with dragon patterns, and the Chinese people use dragon to mean wealth and good luck. On the contrary, people in western countries often use dragons as villains in stories and the dragon slayer is hailed as a warrior.<sup>[2]</sup> Furthermore, "tiger" has always been the image of the king of beasts in the eyes of Chinese people, but in the eyes of Westerners, "lion" belongs to the king of beasts.

#### ***2.3.2 The meaning of colors***

Apart from animals, colors also represent different cultural connotation in China and the west. Talking of blue, Chinese people usually think of the vast sea and sky, which gives them a sense of tranquility and calmness. Westerners often associate blue with melancholy. There is a phrase "a blue

mood" in English and it is used to describe a person who is very unhappy or depressed.<sup>[4]</sup> Another example is "red". China has admired red since ancient times, which symbolizes happiness and auspiciousness. When it comes to the Spring Festival, Chinese people will decorate their front doors with a pair of red couplets. Most of the ornaments are red. However in western countries, red can be frightening because it represents violence and cruelty. For example, "a red-handed man" is a derogatory term and it is used to describe someone who is committing a crime. Among all human social behaviors, marriage is a very important activity. Due to cultural differences, the colors represented by weddings in Chinese and Western countries are also different. In classical Chinese weddings, the most representative color is red. Usually brides who like Chinese weddings will choose to wear red wedding dresses. In a Chinese wedding, not only does the red wedding dress represent the festivity and vitality, but also it represents the bride's warm and open personality. The red wedding dress which looks very shocking, can make the atmosphere of the whole wedding scene become full of passion. Apart from wedding dresses, Chinese wedding invitations are also red. The wedding in western countries usually takes white as the representative color, because white symbolizes purity and loyalty in the eyes of Western people.<sup>[4]</sup>

### **3. The Importance of Cross-cultural Education in College English Teaching**

#### ***3.1 It can Broaden Students' Global Horizon***

With the accelerated process of globalization, countries in the world are more closely connected, and more and more complex cultural phenomena and values also emerge. Strengthening cross-cultural education can help students develop globalization awareness and world vision and improve their cultural understanding ability under the background of globalization. Cross-cultural education can make students' vision no longer limited to their own country, and they will have an understanding of other countries and discover the diversity of world cultures.<sup>[5]</sup> When students learn about the cultural characteristics of different regions, they will enhance their tolerance to multiculturalism. And in cross-cultural communication, students will learn to respect and appreciate different cultural characteristics, so as to reduce cultural conflicts and promote harmonious coexistence.

#### ***3.2 It can Promote the Development of English Language Teaching***

The integration of cross-cultural education into college English language teaching depends on the nature of the English subject. English is a language subject. In China and some other countries, English is not the first language, and the language culture of English is very different from that of other languages, which leads to obstacles in English learning for college students. Under this situation, it is necessary to combine English teaching with cross-cultural education for improving the quality of English language teaching.

#### ***3.3 It can Help Students Improve Their Competitiveness***

Nowadays, many large enterprises in different countries are cooperating closely. Cross-cultural communication ability plays an important role in students' future career and is also an important part of workplace competitiveness. Especially for those college students who want to work in multinational enterprises in the future, cross-cultural communication skills are essential. The development of cross-cultural communication ability needs cross-cultural education. Cross-cultural education can enhance the sensitivity of college students to cultural differences, enable them to establish correct cross-cultural communication cognition and form a complete cultural knowledge system, so as to help college students better adapt to the international environment and cope with the exchange and cooperation between people from different countries, so that they can have advantages in their future work.<sup>[6]</sup>

#### ***3.4 It can Help Students Better Adapt to the Development of the Society***

Strengthening the cross-cultural education of college students is helpful for them to establish themselves in the society. From the perspective of the country's long-term development, the cultivation of college students' cross-cultural communication ability is conducive to the cultivation of more high-quality talents who understand foreign cultures, and thus beneficial to learning some advanced western experience.

#### **4. Problems Existing in Cross-cultural Education in College English Language Teaching**

Most contemporary college students are obviously not very good at cross-cultural communication, including those who major in English, which is mainly due to the fact that contemporary college English teaching has some shortcomings in the cultivation of students' cross-cultural ability.

##### ***4.1 The Lack of Cross-cultural Courses***

Nowadays, most colleges and universities have English majors, but many of these English majors lack the arrangement of courses to cultivate students' cross-cultural communication ability. Under the influence of traditional teaching concepts, the courses for English majors in today's colleges are more related to grammar, reading, writing and listening. In other words, college English majors pay more attention to the cultivation of students' language ability. In fact, in addition to language ability, mastering the knowledge of Western culture is also a necessary condition for successful communication with foreigners. Today many college students in China go abroad for further study.<sup>[3]</sup> Although their language scores are up to standard, they do not know the culture of western countries and have not received any education in this field on campus. Therefore, many of them will inevitably worry about cultural conflicts before going abroad.

##### ***4.2 Teachers' Lack of Cross-cultural Educational Awareness and Ability***

Teachers are the important source of imparting knowledge to students and helping them obtain cultural information. The knowledge structure of English teachers, their understanding of foreign cultures and their attitudes towards intercultural teaching are directly related to the teaching effect.

In recent years, with the popularity of communicative teaching and the increasing discussion of cultural issues in English teaching, many English teachers have gradually improved their awareness of cross-cultural education, but most of them still lack a cross-cultural vision and think that foreign language teaching is to teach language knowledge, so they attach importance to language forms but ignore the spread of social culture.<sup>[4]</sup> We can also find that although most English teachers have profound language teaching skills, they are obviously unable to meet the needs of cross-cultural teaching. This is because of their lack of cultural literacy, systematic knowledge about cross-cultural culture, and strong cross-cultural understanding. Moreover, currently there are very limited cross-cultural materials for reference, most English teachers lack cross-cultural practice environment and training, and some teachers have never gone abroad to experience foreign cultures. These account for the lack of cross-cultural knowledge reserve of teachers. Due to the lack of cross-cultural educational ability, it is difficult for teachers to introduce Western culture to students in detail and depth and explore the cultural connotation in English language forms when imparting knowledge and language skills to students.<sup>[5]</sup> Therefore, it is difficult to help students understand the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western cultures.

##### ***4.3 Students' Attitude towards Western Culture is Unreasonable***

There are huge differences between Chinese and English in cultural traditions, language features and pronunciation, which determines that Chinese students have congenital deficiencies in English learning. This determines that Chinese students have congenital deficiencies in English. So many students hold a resistant attitude when learning English. Secondly, under the exam-oriented education mode, most students treat learning English with a very utilitarian view. Their direct purpose of learning English is more for exams, qualifications or diplomas. In this case, students will have the mentality that cross-cultural communication has nothing to do with exams, and they only need to master relevant skills. This deviation in cognition of English culture leads to the phenomenon that domestic college students generally have strong language ability, but are short of knowledge of interpersonal communication, communicative principles, politeness principles, etc., which not only makes it difficult for college students to treat Western culture with an open mind, but also makes it difficult for them to apply English skills in practice.<sup>[5]</sup>

##### ***4.4 The Approach to Cross-cultural Teaching Is Relatively Simple***

Many teachers are not good at flexibly using cross-cultural teaching methods. From the current situation, we can see that most English teachers are not able to master various modern teaching

methods, and they tend to pay attention to book knowledge in teaching. However, for how to guide students to read a large number of books related to Western culture and how to acquire cross-cultural communication knowledge, they do not pay enough attention to broadening the scope of students' knowledge, and the methods are inappropriate. The teacher-centered teaching principles and methods not only ignore the principal role of students, but also are not beneficial to the cultivation of students' cross-cultural communicative competence.<sup>[5]</sup> There are many English teaching methods suitable for cross-cultural education, including listening and speaking method, communicative method, cognitive method, etc., which have made great contributions to the development of foreign language teaching theory and practice. In recent years, some new teaching methods have been introduced from abroad, which have broadened the horizon of English teachers and added vitality to English teaching.

## **5. Strategies for Cultivating Cross-cultural Communicative Competence in College English Teaching**

### ***5.1 Schools Should Offer Special Cross-cultural Courses***

Schools should not only arrange courses about grammar, listening, speaking and writing for English majors, but also arrange special courses for teachers to teach cross-cultural knowledge. In cross-cultural courses, teachers shouldn't only lead students to understand Western cultural knowledge superficially, but should explain Western cultural knowledge in depth and detail, thus in order to improve the classroom teaching effect, teachers must prepare lessons carefully.<sup>[4]</sup> In the process of lesson preparation, teachers need to make full use of teaching materials, excavate a variety of cultural factors, flexibly design teaching activities according to the teaching content, use various effective teaching methods, and combine language factors with cultural factors, so as to help students deepen their understanding of the values, religious beliefs and behavioral habits of English-speaking people.

### ***5.2 Teachers Should Strengthen Their Cross-cultural Awareness and Enrich Relevant Knowledge***

Teachers should improve students' ability of using language through English teaching. Using language is to achieve the purpose of communication. In order to achieve this goal, teachers should actively change their educational concepts, expand their horizons and learn more about cross-cultural knowledge and integrate cross-cultural awareness into English teaching. Only in this way can they guide students to understand the cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries, pay attention to the cultural differences among different nationalities and establish a respectful and inclusive attitude towards foreign cultures. In order to increase their knowledge, teachers can receive some cross-cultural training. Also, nowadays universities in various countries have many visiting programs for scholars. Teachers can take advantage of the opportunity of going abroad to get in touch with foreigners, experience the foreign culture personally, and integrate themselves into different environments.

### ***5.3 Students Should Attach Importance to the Study of Cross-cultural Knowledge***

Students should also take the initiative to learn cross-cultural knowledge. Learning cross-cultural will be of great help for them to live abroad in the future because they can know how to get along with foreigners correctly and behave appropriately to avoid cultural conflicts. In order to learn much about cross-cultural knowledge, students shouldn't only be limited to the textbooks, they should also go to the library to read some materials, or interact with teachers more. With the development of modern science and technology, different kinds of English movies emerge one after another which also contain cultural elements and can be used as a source of cultural knowledge.<sup>[5]</sup> Therefore, students can watch more movies in their spare time to learn the values of foreigners. Furthermore, many universities also hold regular cross-cultural activities and students can actively participate in them to increase their chances of contacting foreigners.

### ***5.4 Teachers Should Innovate Their Teaching Methods***

Cultivating students' cross-cultural communication ability requires teachers to innovate and reform the teaching mode. Traditional English teaching methods are no longer suitable for cross-cultural teaching. Teachers should use multimedia in teaching, so as to stimulate students' interest in learning and create an active classroom atmosphere. Teachers can play some movie clips and search some videos and pictures to show Western culture in front of students intuitively, so that students can

improve their language expression ability while learning Western cultural knowledge. Besides, contrast teaching method is also one of the most important teaching methods in cross-cultural education.<sup>[5]</sup> While teaching Western culture, teachers should also compare it with Chinese culture. Taking the tea culture of China and the West as an example, teachers should introduce the tea drinking habit in China as well as that in the West. Westerners have the habit of drinking afternoon tea, and they like to add milk or sugar to the tea. In China, most people like to drink pure tea without any seasoning. By comparison, students can better remember the cultural differences between China and the West.

## 6. Conclusion

The fundamental purpose of English teaching is to communicate with people from different cultures. The traditional teaching mode which takes the improvement of professional skills as the core has been unable to meet the needs of multi-cultural communication in contemporary society. As an extremely important part of English teaching, cross-cultural knowledge is of great significance, so it is necessary for college teachers and students to know about cross-cultural knowledge. In practice, teachers must put cross-cultural education concepts and measures into English teaching. With the integration of language and cultural knowledge, we can cultivate compound innovative talents.

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