

# Promoting Cross-cultural Communication in EFL Classes in China

Yueming Zhu\*

Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
zhuyueming2@gmail.com  
\*Corresponding author

**Abstract:** *In this increasingly globalized world, it is necessary to possess the ability to interact with others across diverse cultures. EFL education, as an authoritative and unique platform, promotes cross-cultural communication competence of English learners effectively. This article emphasizes the significance of integrating cross-cultural content in EFL teaching in respect of the relationship between EFL teaching and cross-cultural communication, between language teaching and culture teaching, between linguistic ability and communicative ability. After discussing the existing problems in the current process of integrating English classrooms with cross-cultural communication skills in Chinese universities, a series of practical strategies are suggested to empower EFL students with cross-cultural communication competence to adapt, navigate and thrive in this diverse cultural and global society.*

**Keywords:** *cross-cultural communication; EFL teaching; communicative competence*

## 1. Introduction

With the growing development of global economy and politics, the communications and cooperation between nations are gradually increasing and bring people closer together, which turns the world into a “global village”<sup>[1]</sup>. International communication requires cross-culture communication, which makes an exposure for people to cultural differences. Brown(1994) believes that language and culture are one and they cannot separated from each other<sup>[2]</sup>. Language not only consists of grammar, phonology and lexis, but is a social phenomenon with cultural values. Being sensitive to and comprehend the cultural context is a significant part to a good cross-culture communication. Thus, before we communicate with people who are from other cultures, we need to be familiar with their cultural production and how they present themselves in certain groups<sup>[3]</sup>.

Cross-culture communication is commonly defined as a process in which two or more people from different cultural backgrounds communicate, interact and negotiate shared meanings<sup>[4]</sup>. It is a situation between individuals from diverse culture groups and those people exchange their own beliefs, opinions and values. Cross-cultural communication around us is constantly changing all the time and it emphasizes on culture, which accompanied by people with different culture in vast opportunities. Therefore, language learners should pay more attention to culture issues and have awareness of differences among others. According to Hanvey(1979), cross-culture awareness refers to the understandings of native cultures as well as other counties’ cultures. Language learners’ native language and culture background often limited their comprehend of the target language, which may cause them to misunderstand the meanings of the other side or produce error output. In addition, cultural diversity can bring language learners the novel perspectives and modes of thinking. Damen (1987), hence, stated that one who carries with cross-culture awareness will be the master of the cross-culture communication<sup>[5]</sup>. In today’ s globalized word, the capacity to interact effectively with others across culture is the key to success in various fields of society. Davitishvili(2017) defined “cross-culture communication competence” as a skill to communicate appropriately in different cultural contexts and to interact proficiently with individuals from other culture backgrounds<sup>[6]</sup>.

## 2. Problems in Cross-cultural Communication in EFL Class

Chinese College English Curriculum Requirements published in 2007 included cross-cultural communication as one of the main learning contents of college English courses, which, however did not instruct specific teaching methods and contents. The majority of universities only conduct simple

explorations in practice and have not formed a complete system. Currently, although cross-cultural communication in college EFL teaching are constantly improving, various problems have also emerged.

### ***2.1. The relative backwardness of teaching methods and models***

Wang and Chang(2023) pointed that the primary purpose of learning a language is to communicate with others, hence, the approaches of college English teaching needs to be innovated with communicative characteristics<sup>[7]</sup>. In China, the content of cross-cultural teaching is basic knowledge language teaching, involving vocabularies, grammar, phonetics, semantics, listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. From this perspective, cross-cultural teaching is limited to the linguistic level of English, and teachers excessively focus on basic knowledge of language while neglect cultural factors. The advantage of this sort of teaching method is that it can solidify the theoretical basis of the target language. Besides, students can grasp critical ability of English expression and usage. In terms of disadvantage, it is difficult to promote students to develop high-level of cross-cultural communication competence, which introduces an obstacle to integrate the goal of cultivating students' cross-cultural communication skills with EFL classroom. This teaching method cannot meet the demand of cultivating talents with cross-culture communication skill.

### ***2.2. Lack of Systematic Education Resources***

Cross-Cultural Education Guide written by Dan,Janet & Milton and published in 2009 point out that for cross-cultural teaching, teachers should respect the needs of learners and integrate knowledge from various disciplines based on their existing knowledge and experience. Otherwise,EFL teachers need to introduce the culture of China and other countries in the process of integration. With the comparison of the differences among people's living standards, culture, values and other aspects of other countries, EFL learners can produce effective cross-cultural communications. Nowadays, cross-cultural communication textbooks in Chinese college tend to stress on introducing British and American cultures, ignoring the excellent traditional Chinese culture. Thus, Wang and Chang(2023) mentioned that EFL teachers should pay attention to language communication in the classroom.In other words, traditional Chinese culture should be represented and displayed in English, it is an effective method to illustrate the uniqueness of Chinese culture while also to compare and integrate with other nations' cultures.The teaching resources in this area are not involved in mainstream textbooks, thus EFL teachers need to supplement them in classes. However, teachers with different levels may have certain deviations in the knowledge they impart, which results in scattered distribution of cross-cultural teaching resources and a lack of systematic education resources.

## **3. The Significance of Integrating Cross-cultural Content in EFL Teaching**

### ***3.1. The relationship between EFL teaching and cross-cultural communication***

Cheng (2003) maintained that The ultimate goal of English teaching is to enable students to use the target language for communication.Cross-cultural communication is not only the purpose of learning English, but also an instrument of English teaching.It contains the basic structural knowledge of English,which will be used proficiently by students in certain communications and situations.The American Association for the Teaching of Foreign Languages has incorporated cultural instruction into communicative competence in its proposal for foreign language learning.(Cheng,2003).They believe that communication competence should include: 1)language--mastering linguistic knowledge; 2)function--application of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills; 3)context--choosing appropriate utterances in certain situations; 4)the relationship between communicators--applying suitable words with one's own identity based on the other person's identity, status, and social distance; 5)sociocultural knowledge--using a language is a social practice actually. According to Hyme(1971) as cited in Larsen-freeman and Anderson (2011), being able to communicate requires communicative competence more than linguistic competence, also “appropriateness” is the core of communicative competence<sup>[8]</sup>. The purpose of cultivating communicative competence is to enable learners to speak appropriately in communication according to topics, contexts, and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, integrating cross-cultural element in English teaching can provide EFL students a clear comprehension of the structure of English and eliminate misunderstandings and errors caused by the mother tongue, which greatly improve the effectiveness of English teaching and learning.

### ***3.2. The Relationship between Language Teaching and Culture Teaching***

Language is a part of culture, precisely, a manifestation and carrier of a national culture. Brown(1994) stated that culture is the root of a nationality, and language as a communicative component of a culture is its most intuitive and obvious representation. Language records the history and reflects the cultural attitude of a nation, it shapes person's ways of thinking. People apply language to express own ideas and feeling with others. This statement is emphasized by Larsen-freeman and Anderson(2011)that "Culture is the everyday lifestyle of people who use the language." Thus, language and culture are intrinsically intertwined. Sapir-Whorf(1952,1956) proposed a hypothesis which is known as "Theory of linguistic relativity", demonstrating the relationship among language, culture and society. The central notion of this hypothesis is that people's vision of the world is determined by his own native language. That is to say, culture, religion, geography and society will influenced people's thoughts, utterance and behaviors. There is no culture that is isolated from a language in the world, nor is there a language detached from a specific cultural background. In view of this, the cultural use of English and an understanding of cultural background should be incorporated into EFL programs<sup>[9]</sup>.

### ***3.3. The Relationship between Linguistic Ability and Communicative Ability***

In a broad sense, communicative competence includes linguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Cheng(2003) pointed out that communicative skill refers to the specific application of language composition rules and usage rules in a certain context. An applied discipline --cross-cultural communication developed worldwide since the 1950s enables language learners to enhance linguistic and communicative competence comprehensively. It emphasizes a holistic study of a language focused on contrasting and comprehending cultural similarities and differences.

According to Yang(1995), three kinds of behaviors will take place simultaneously when using the language; 1) locutionary act--all meaningful speech expressed through phonetics and the concepts explained by words based on syntactic rules; 2) illocutionary act--speech act performed according to a specific relationship between the speaker and the listener; 3) perlocutionary act--its function is not directly reflected in speech, but depends on the context of the communication. These three coordinate and work together to achieve the expressive function of discourse.

In summary, in the relationship among language, culture, and cross-cultural communication, language is a direct reflection of culture and culture influences the application and development of the language. Cheng(2003) suggested that in cross-cultural communication employing language as a medium, communicators should follow the cultural and pragmatic rules of the language. Since the ultimate goal of English teaching is to proficiently utilize the target language and to be able to produce appropriate communication with the culture of the target language, EFL teachers should take cross-cultural communication as the guiding principle and design courses devoting to fostering learners' language application and communication skills. As Barnett and Lee argued in 2022, developing cross-cultural communicative competence requires integrating cross-culture elements into EFL teaching to raise learners' cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence. By cultivating this awareness, EFL learners are able to improve their communicative capacity to interact with other from different cultures in an effective, respectful and meaningful way. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce cross-cultural content into English language teaching to equip students with the skills and knowledge use English correctly and proficiently.

## **4. Innovative Approaches and Strategies for Cross-cultural Communication in EFL Class**

To promote cross-cultural communication in EFL classes, educators need to improve their instruction method and teaching quality. Below are some suggested methods and strategies:

### ***4.1. Incorporating Cross-cultural Communication Factors into Various Stages of English Teaching Classes***

Generally speaking, the classroom is divided into an introduction section, a presentation section, a summary section and an assignment section. In the leading-in part, EFL teachers can start with some activities for raising cultural awareness, for example, class discussions or case descriptions, in order to encourage students to discuss stereotypes and bias about own or others' cultures, and share their cultural perspectives. Bennett(1993) claims that employing activities that cultivate students'

cross-cultural awareness is essential, which allows EFL learners to reflect on their cultural misconceptions toward own and other cultures<sup>[10]</sup>. With the assistance of explanation about cultural differences, students' interest can be stimulated who may integrate into the classroom effectively. With regard to the presentation part, EFL teachers should provide and increase opportunities of interaction among students so that learners enhance their communication skills through teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction. In addition, in EFL classrooms, students need to be exposed to a variety of linguistic and cross-cultural contexts. For this purpose, teachers can apply authentic materials such as films, music, lectures or literature from other cultures. This statement is emphasized by Byram (1997) that using authentic materials benefits language learners to settle themselves into target cultural context<sup>[11]</sup>. In terms of assignment part, communicative assignment can be added in students' homework, like recording interaction videos or making conversations with foreign friends, to improve EFL learners' cross-cultural competence. Hui (2010) found that participating diverse cultural class has raised EFL students' cultural awareness about both native and other societies, which tremendously stimulates teachers' willingness to engage in cross-cultural teaching<sup>[12]</sup>. Therefore, integrating cross-cultural communication factors to EFL classes is beneficial for the systematic transmission of cross-cultural knowledge and the improvement of cross-cultural communication talents level.

#### ***4.2. Improving Teachers' self Cross-cultural Communication Ability***

As a guide for student learning, teachers should definitely equip themselves with abundant knowledge base and excellent teaching quality. However, Ma (2020) reveals that in China there are quite short of teaching staff who are capable of excavating the cultural connotations in text and imparting this kind of cultural knowledge into EFL teaching<sup>[13]</sup>, this may cause some difficulties of raising students' cross-cultural awareness. Fortunately, the information era provides a lot of convenience for teachers to improve themselves. For instance, EFL teachers can participate in relevant seminars to improve their skills concerning cross-cultural communication. Farnia, Maryam, & Rozina (2009) advised teachers to conduct or analyze more cross-cultural and contrastive pragmatics studies, which is conducive to strengthen teachers' ability about promoting their students' awareness of the social and cultural diversity of native language and target language<sup>[14]</sup>. Besides, EFL teachers can also choose to study abroad so as to experience the cultural traditions, values, and customs of other countries, it is easier for them to impart more authentic knowledge and resources to their students. Furthermore, teachers should make full use of online information resources such as video interviews or documentaries to learn about the culture and customs of other countries. Teachers, in short, should utilize a wide range of resources to improve their cross-cultural communication skills for cultivating more relevant talents.

#### ***4.3. Including Cross-cultural Knowledge in The Evaluation Criterion of College English Courses***

As Wang and Chang (2023) stated, the cultivation of EFL learners' cross-cultural communication competence is a long-term process, relying on accumulation of relevant knowledge in daily life. Apart from teachers' effort to impart cross-cultural communication knowledge in the classroom, it should also be included in the evaluation system of universities. Accordingly, EFL teachers need to establish a formative evaluation criterion that integrates cross-cultural knowledge into all aspects of the evaluation process such as regular grades, classroom performance, final exams and etc. In traditional English assessment, teachers tend to test students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities with question types such as cloze, reading comprehension, and essay correction to evaluate students' mastery of basic linguistic knowledge of English. But, in fact, this assessment method may lead students to only focus on linguistic component learning and neglect the development of cross-cultural communication skills. For this reason, Chinese universities take the responsibility for increasing the proportion of cross-cultural knowledge in EFL classes and establishing systematic evaluation criterion in order to pay more attention to learners' accumulation of cross-cultural knowledge.

#### ***4.4. Creating Learning Environment Conducive to Cultivating Cross-cultural Communication Skills***

The creation of the environment is divided into humane environment and physical environment. As for the humane environment, Briggs and Check (1986) demonstrate that face-to-face interaction with people with other cultural background has a positive effect on students' cultural comprehension and communicative competence<sup>[15]</sup>. According to this statement, schools can set up 'English corner' where language learners would meet all sorts of speakers from other cultural background and share their own experience and sights, which provides students a first perspective to attach different culture. Another

merit of this advice is that it can reduce students' sense of timidity in using foreign languages for communication, and boost their self-confidence to talk with others actively. The other suggestion for college is to establish cultural exchange programs that collaborate with other schools or institutions in other countries. These programs offer opportunities for students to communicate with individuals from diverse cultural background and experience the customs and traditions of other countries, are extremely advantageous to promote language and cultural learning unconsciously. In terms of producing physical environment, colleges can create cultural collisions through sticking up posters, designing and building sculptures and architecture in school etc. to stimulate students' interest in different cultures. As the principle supporter for students' language learning, universities have abundant teaching resources. If the advantages of these resources are fully utilized, it will have facilitation on training EFL students' cross-cultural communication abilities.

## 5. Conclusion

With the development of a more connected and harmonious world, people equipped with cross-cultural competence will adapt, collaborate and thrive well in diverse cultural environment, who can also be conducive positively to the global society<sup>[16]</sup>. Educators, especially college language teachers, play a significant role in nurturing these capabilities of students by incorporating cross-cultural communication factors into their teaching classes and create a classroom environment filled with a sense of cultural communication. Moreover, teachers must profoundly understand the interior rules of language teaching and recognize the relationship between language and culture. The combination of language and culture in English curriculum enables language students to receive inclusive comprehension of cultural similarities and differences between native language and target language, then efficiently apply the target language in practical contexts. However, in Chinese universities, there are still a series of problems existing in the current process of integrating English classrooms with cross-cultural communication skills such as uneven teaching levels, outdated teaching methods and inadequate educational resources. To address these issues, this article attempts to propose some innovative approaches to English teaching, including integrating cross-cultural communication knowledge into university English course assessments, incorporating communication factors into teaching environments, improving teacher proficiency and etc. By doing so, EFL students are expected to become proficient and confident in English communication with cultural diversity.

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