

Big Culture Community and New Theme-Based English Teaching

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Abstract: Big culture community is based on the core concept that civilizations have commonalities and can complement each other. It is a recognition of common experience of human beings that goes beyond regions, countries and nations. The theme-based instruction guided by big culture community devotes to using "theme" as a clue to form differential cognition while accepting the excellent culture shared by mankind, and building a holistic, relevant and systematic knowledge network in the process of fully contacting and integrating into the practice of social life, so as to cultivate the ability to inherit excellent culture, the consciousness of thinking actively and dynamic view of knowledge.

Keywords: Big Culture Community; New Theme-based English Teaching; Pedagogical Path

1. Introduction

"Cultural Community" is an integral part of the cultural awareness module in the foreign language subject. The *General Senior High School Curriculum Standards: English (2017 Edition)* (hereinafter referred to as *2017 Edition*) clearly defines "Cultural Awareness" as "an understanding of Chinese and foreign cultures, recognition of excellent cultures, and cross-cultural cognition, attitudes, and behaviors which students demonstrate in the context of globalization."^[1] Then, "Cultural Community" can be understood as the understanding and acceptance of the common or shared cognition, emotional experience, psychological experience and other spiritual experiences and spiritual wealth of people from different regions, countries and nationalities in the same or similar production and life, which is the civilizational basis for the construction of the community of human destiny. It is also an important element of the community of human destiny. Intercultural communication based on a sense of big culture community is more likely to demonstrate appropriate attitudes and behaviors, gain a deeper knowledge of the world, and cast a more tolerant attitude toward the world we all live in. The theme-based teaching of big culture community upholds the recognition of cultural differences on the basis of sorting out cultural commonalities among thematic series of texts, and uses the cultivation of cultural awareness as the fulcrum of teaching, and the cultivation of language skills as the lever to pry the development of thinking and learning abilities.

2. Theoretical Origins of Big Cultural Community

The reality of the world since the twentieth century seems to be as Huntington's book "The Clash of Civilizations" says that the boundaries of the world's cultures are becoming clearer and clearer, and cultural community is in an unprecedented crisis. The daily practice of foreign language teaching in China to cultivate intercultural competence has also fallen into a single presentation of cultural differences, resulting in students' cognition of human civilization being limited to the knowledge of indicated differences, and even forming the concept of either-or opposition. However, from the perspective of the entire human history, different civilizations have commonalities and can complement and learn from each other.

The big culture community has its historical and philosophical roots. Chinese and foreign philosophical thought have always shared the pursuit of goodness and beauty. Looking back at the traditional educational thought reflected in the origins of Chinese and foreign philosophical thought, all agree that human beings have a natural desire for goodness, a genuine sense of expecting to be accepted and recognized, and striving for survival and love. Examples are the "sense of sympathy, of shame, of

modesty, and of right and wrong" by Mencius^[2] and "No one knowingly does evil" by Socrates, as well as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory. Living in the society, human beings need to be respected and loved. Under love and respect, people form an emotional and value community that holds certain aesthetic standards. As Max Weber (2005) further defined "community" on the basis of Tonnies as the social relationship that participants feel subjectively (emotional or traditional) to belong to a whole on the basis of observing social behavior orientation in individual occasions or in pure modes^[3]. In fact, any group with the function of community established by people need to cross cultural differences and reach a certain level of emotional commonality.

There is a high degree of similarity in the origins of Chinese and Western thought, both of which come from a profound reflection on suffering and distress. Both civilizations were born at a time when the world was in turmoil, society was out of control, and everyone was in danger. Socrates, the representative of Western civilization with ancient Greek civilization as its source, proposed that "virtue is knowledge", while Confucianism, the most profound influence on Chinese civilization, proposed that "Manifestation of God's will" is the highest spiritual state of life and advocated "benevolence". The Chinese and Western civilizations coincidentally turned to the consideration of life and the ultimate concern for the meaning of life. According to E. Said (1978), "Cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality."^[4] The similarity of origins makes it possible for different cultures to communicate and understand each other and to identify with each other. Therefore, the cultivation of students' identity consciousness for their intercultural communication competence conforms to the essence of culture and civilization.

But it is undeniable that the perspectives of Chinese and Western civilizations are different. Ancient Greek civilization grasps the world through the lens of reason, thus laying the foundation for modern Western thought. But Confucianism grasps the universe through the awareness of life's emotions, and in this way has shaped Chinese characteristics. Undoubtedly, the two civilizations form a complementary relationship. In the historical development of Chinese and Western thought, one civilization can be inspired by the other, gaining richer connotations and deeper perceptions. Confucianism and ancient Greek philosophy acquired the concept of "emptiness" from Buddhism and Judaism respectively, giving new sources of thought to Chinese civilization, which was at a bottleneck in its development, and to ancient Greek philosophy. According to Anne Phillips (2007), culture is neither bounded nor closed; it is produced by human beings, but does not explain the existence of human behavior^[5]. Attempting to define or place boundaries on culture often results in its closure and separation of the entire world with which it interacts and influences. From six rounds of global surveys, Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel (cited in Jiang Fei) found, with the passage of time, the exchanges between Chinese and Western civilizations gradually went beyond the limits of region and knowledge, economic development and social types, etc. People's value concerns have moved away from the original "traditional" and "survival" orientation. They have generally moved towards "secular rationality" and "self-expression", and Chinese and Western civilizations are showing great convergence beyond historical differences^[6]. The convergence and complementarity of civilizations illustrate the possibility, feasibility, and necessity of cultural identity. Only emphasizing cultural pluralism and differences is more likely to lead to increased cultural divisions and alienation. Consequently, the so-called clash of civilizations is actually a clash between people representing civilizations and cultures. Therefore, people are the first to cross-culture, and the cultivation of intercultural competence is first and foremost about the cultivation of human character and attitudes in the world. Sameness and similarity are the basis and confidence of cross-cultural interaction, while difference and complementarity are the parts of cultural subjects that need to understand, tolerate, and learn from each other.

In the field of education, foreign scholars often take "cultural community" as a teaching concept to organize classrooms, and thus believe that a community of teaching based on cultural identity and emotional identity is an important way to improve teaching efficiency. From the perspective of educational justice, Fred Dervin (2016) believed that only by downplaying the cultural marks behind national identity, paying attention to special cases, and focusing on instability, can we achieve equal communication between people in order to achieve true cross-cultural education^[7]. Based on foreign studies, domestic scholars also advocate the integration of "cultural identity" into language teaching. Guo Xiaochuan (2012), through an in-depth analysis of cases in the United States and the European Union, found that it is necessary to enhance the degree of cultural identity in order to achieve cross-cultural communication successfully^[8]. Feng Jianjun (2018) argued that the indispensable elements of education on common human values include education on basic human values and education on the pluralistic understanding of national and ethnic values^[9]. In the study of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, He, Fang et al. (2019) argued that to achieve efficient dissemination of Chinese culture to foreign

countries, it is necessary to deeply explore the national culture and ethnic identity of the target countries, etc., and take the common elements of Chinese culture as the entry point to build an international curriculum for general education classes^[10]. The cultivation of a sense of big culture community cannot be ignored in the field of foreign language education. Helping learners with a critical and reflective perspective from similarities rather than differences is a necessary cultivation for foreign language talents in terms of developing a righteous personality, enriching their own culture, gaining national self-confidence, and facing common human dilemmas together.

3. Big Culture Community of Theme-based English Teaching

Human civilization and culture originate from thinking about people's daily life and production. The similarities and complementarities of civilizations originate from the production and activities of people around the world. The view of these similarities and complementarities becomes the common proposition of philosophical thought and the common theme of art works. Therefore, using themes as clues throughout the process of teaching activities is beneficial to form a holistic perception of human civilization and an objective understanding of the characteristics of different types of cultures and their relationships. Wang Qiang (2015) proposed that the theme-led teaching content should be designed at first to allow students to explore the meanings of the theme. She believes that, based on discourses and cultural practices, English teaching shall facilitate the formation and development of core competencies of the English subject^[11]. This proposal not only lays the groundwork for the new version of the "Curriculum Standards" but also provides feasible guidance for achieving the integration of instrumentality and humanity in class during the stage of basic education. The theme-based teaching firstly appeared in the United States in the 1950s, and began to be introduced into English classroom teaching from real context in China from the turn of the 20th to the 21st century. Professor Ying Huilan (1999) promoted the "student-centered theme-based teaching model" to the whole country by editing the "Eleventh Five-Year" national planned textbook "New College English"^[12]. She used teaching materials closely related to students' life to provide language practice samples and establish the main line of teaching activities, in order to realize the transformation from the teaching of language knowledge inculcation to the cultivation of cross-cultural practical ability. This is undoubtedly the beginning of theme-based teaching practice in China. From the perspective of teaching principles, teaching design, practical aspects, and teaching suggestions, Cheng Xiaotang (2018), on the basis of fully sorting out previous studies in China, comprehensively discussed the feasibility and specific practices of theme-based teaching, as well as problems to be avoided, which is also a summary of ten years of theme-based English teaching practices in China^[13]. With the introduction of ideological and political curriculum into foreign language classrooms, Chinese culture has received unprecedented attention in the input process. Scholars have also made studies for this purpose in terms of materials development, teaching paths, teaching methods, and case studies. Based on the development of "Mingde English", Liu Zhengguang et al. (2021) explicated theme-led and item-expanded teaching principles, and carried out the training of ideological and political content such as theme-enhanced understanding of Chinese cultural connotation and socialist values and language expression, which made up for the lack of input of excellent Chinese culture in the past^[14]. In the past five years, reading teaching has initiated the research of large-unit teaching or holistic teaching of thematic units based on the horizontal integration of teaching materials, in order to help students form relatively complete cognition and value judgment of the same topic. Theme-based teaching has been practiced for more than twenty years in China, and scholars have made breakthroughs in their research. They have experienced the instrumental language training guided by the theme, consciously integrated foreign cultural knowledge, and finally paid attention to the input of excellent Chinese cultural elements, so as to meet the unification of instrumentality and humanity in language teaching. If teaching can span different types of civilizations and cultures from the perspective of "Big Culture Community", and trace the social and historical origins behind the culture, the distance between Chinese and foreign civilizations can be narrowed. By experiencing more systematic and profound cultural cognition, students can overcome the mystery and alienation of foreign cultures. In the atmosphere of daring to think, music and discrimination, students can stimulate learning enthusiasm and imperceptible learning ability, so as to avoid the rigid phenomenon for the sake of integrating teaching materials and importing culture.

Under the guidance of the big culture identity, the primary task of theme-based teaching is to help students explore and summarize the common and similar points of Chinese and foreign cultures. Because on the basis of the cognition of common phenomena, the appearance of cultural differences makes cultural awareness training, critical thinking ability strengthening, learning orientation more focused, and teaching efficiency guaranteed. The superiority of big culture theme-based teaching, which emphasizes

the tracing of cultural commonalities and the comparison of differences, lies in the perspective of the richest human emotions from the smallest text, and the reflection of the most real society, life and humanity. This is conducive to help students from the text inside the close reading, capture, discrimination, appreciation, questioning and so on to the text outside the problem awareness, cultural awareness, critical awareness, learning consciousness, through the emotional to rational process. It is an ideal form of integrating four core qualities and unifying the instrumental and humanistic features of language teaching. Just as Parmenides believes the thought and the being are unified, the reader starts the interaction between thinking and the thought with the text at the moment he touches the text, and experiences the process of circular dialogue between the reader and the text, the reader and the self, and the reader and the environment. Through the bridge of exploration, text, self and environment carry out spiritual dialogue and exchange of views to obtain a clearer and more rational understanding of problems. *The General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards* (2017 edition, revised in 2020) proposed that the goal of cultivating cultural awareness is "to acquire cultural knowledge, understand cultural connotations, compare cultural similarities and differences, draw on cultural essence, form correct values, firmly establish cultural self-confidence, form good character of self-respect, self-confidence and self-improvement, and have certain intercultural communication and the ability to spread Chinese culture ability."^[15] Thus, the teaching content must include: the cognition of excellent Chinese and foreign cultures; the comparison, appreciation, criticism and reflection of Chinese and foreign cultures; the understanding and tolerance of different types of cultures; and the cultivation of correct values and moral emotions. The teaching activities that should be accomplished around the teaching content are: establishing thematic contexts based on different types of discourse, using language skills to acquire, sort out and integrate linguistic and cultural knowledge, understanding language in depth, appreciating discourse, comparing and exploring cultural connotations, and drawing cultural essence^[16]. On this basis, the following steps are suggested for teaching: "perceiving Chinese and foreign cultural knowledge through analysis and comparison, identifying with fine culture through appreciation and absorption, deepening cultural understanding through cognition and internalization, and becoming civilized persons in behavior and conduct."^[17] Thus, the development of a big cultural awareness requires the creation of a context for language and cultural learning around the theme of the text. The teaching explores the common focus of cultural phenomena in the text and the state of perception of the problem, as well as the social and historical reasons for the similarities and differences in perceptions, through the form of appreciation. In the whole process of exploration, language and cultural learning are intertwined, and the synergistic growth of language aesthetics, cultural consciousness, critical thinking ability and learning consciousness is realized. The teaching paths of the big culture teaching idea can be generally described as exploring the big culture theme—tracing and comparing the origin of the big culture theme—internalizing and externalizing the big culture theme.

3.1. Exploring the Big Culture Theme

The theme is the author's central idea expressed through the content and form of the work, which is a general statement of the main idea of the story. The theme is the axis of the work. The construction of the plot, the shaping of the characters, the establishment of the tone, and the selection of the style are all guided by it. Therefore, the key to grasping the theme is to appreciate the connotation, style, and layout of the words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters around the title. The process of capturing thematic information through text close reading involves the comprehension of language knowledge connotation, the cultivation of language aesthetic ability and the ability to express the theme. From the perspective of big culture, the comprehension of language connotation requires learners to break through the boundary of pure English language and explore the commonality of cognitive form and aesthetic value in the similarity of Chinese and English language forms. For example, learners could comprehend the commonality of Chinese and foreign cognitive psychology from the level of vocabulary, experience the diversity and depth of Chinese and foreign languages from the translation, and understand the resemblance of Chinese and foreign thinking from the similarity of rhetorical devices. In addition, learners could understand common thinking patterns from the changes in sentence patterns and observe similar patterns of emotional expression from the structure of discourse. In essence, the text-based big culture teaching is the mutual reflection of Chinese and foreign cultures led by teachers and students in the process of exploring themes based on English texts. Actually, the classroom is a space for teachers and students as well as students and students to promote the construction of a common discourse system to examine Chinese and foreign culture. Teachers can establish the context of the big culture theme through the texts discussed in class, and guide students to distance themselves from the appearance of events. During the repeated intensive reading, learners build a multidimensional and diverse thinking network through questions and dialogues, and reveal the common spiritual world and spiritual wealth of

human beings from a more objective and comprehensive perspective. In the process of exchange of ideas, exchange of views, mutual inspiration and continuous clarification of the connotation of the theme, the classroom reflects the requirements on the language application ability, language aesthetic ability and thinking ability of the learning subject.

3.2. Tracing and Comparing the Origin of the Big Culture Theme

Cultural traceability and comparison make teaching go deeper into the root and essence of problems, find out the basic reasons for the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, so as to realize the value of education in the exchange and mutual learning between Chinese excellent traditional culture and Western cultural thoughts. The key to teaching is to look for similar interpretations of Chinese and Western cultures and different extensions of history in the context of the learned texts and other subjects, so as to summarize the similarities and differences of the same topic in Chinese and Western cultures. Taking the high school English textbook of people's education press (2019 Edition) as an example, Listening and Speaking 4 and Reading and Thinking 2 in Unit1 make extensive use of first-person narratives, reflecting the narrator's strong sense of subjectivity. The modal verbs "have to" and "should" and auxiliary verbs "will" and "won't" are used in most sentences in the discourse, which reflect the anxiety of freshmen in choosing courses and clubs. Anxiety arises because the subject consciousness is challenged in an unfamiliar environment. However, adolescence is the period when the subject consciousness begins to become strong and easily frustrated, which links the text theme "Subject Consciousness" and the unit title "Teenage Life" into a whole concept "Teenage Subject Consciousness". The origin of theme-based culture can be traced from the content of textbooks that students have learned and vertically integrate the texts related to the theme. This not only facilitates students to refresh their knowledge and form a complete and profound cognition, but also makes it easier to go beyond the textbook to explore the historical roots and philosophical reflections of cultural phenomena and seek evidence in contemporary social activities and cultural representations. The same issue of environmental anxiety is presented in "First Impressions" in the same volume of "Welcome Unit". The text in Unit 1, Section A 3a of the first volume of Grade 9 explains the relationship between "subjective consciousness" and "cognitive motivation", while the text in Unit 4, Section A 3a of the second volume of Grade 8 describes the impact of family emotional distress on subject consciousness that most people may experience. The topic of subject consciousness frequently appears in the textbook, which proves its social attention, is an unavoidable problem of modern human civilization. "Subject consciousness" is the symbol of human civilization going out of ancient times and into modern times, and is the symbol of the progress of the whole human civilization. Western Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" marks the arrival of subject consciousness in their respective fields of thought, which is followed by equality, moral subject, faith and other ideas that represent the core of modern human civilization. The subject consciousness in Chinese culture has actually been thought in Confucianism as early as Confucius and Mencius advocated "benevolence", but the connotation of "subject consciousness" in Chinese civilization is always full of human temperature in "harmony with culture", while the "subject consciousness" advocated by Western civilization is often involved in rationality. Starting from the existing knowledge and aiming at acquiring new knowledge, teachers and students repeatedly verify in reality and seek answers to questions through thinking activities such as comparison, questioning, critical thinking and so on. At the same time, it is necessary to help students understand, accept and adapt to the fuzziness of cultural boundary and the uncertainty of the development of world civilization, and form dynamic cognitive awareness, so as to solve the problem that the school education which mainly imparts static knowledge cannot meet the practical needs of the dynamic development of society.

3.3. Internalizing and Externalizing the Big Culture Theme

Subject knowledge is internalized in the sublimation of wisdom, the richness of heart and the purity of character, and externalized in the attitude of daily life, the feelings towards home and country, and the way of getting along with the world. Therefore, it is unrealistic to completely realize the internalization and externalization of theme-based teaching in one or two classes, and to make comprehensive observation and evaluation, but must be implemented in the whole life of students for a long time. Therefore, the internalization of cultural knowledge and the externalization of literacy need to provide opportunities for repeated experience outside class, and establish a continuous and systematic learning and thinking in class. Extracurricular teaching resources mainly include students' life, classic art works, newspapers and magazines. Teachers can focus on the subject of the class, fully respect students' subjectivity and individual differences, and guide them to deeply examine the society and the world through life examples, so as to get inspiration and insight out of the confusion more easily. Classical

works of art are the crystallization of intellectuals' reflection on social history and culture and their own life. Students are exposed to as many artistic classics as possible, which is tantamount to swimming the ocean of excellent culture. Newspapers and magazines that keep pace with the times, such as book reviews, news reviews and social hot spots, provide students with opportunities to deeply understand and reflect on the current civilization of their own times. In the process of extensive reading, thinking, communication and reflection, students can acquire the ability of contemporary interpretation of Chinese and Western cultural traditions, form a confident and tolerant character, the consciousness of lifelong learning, and the ability to deeply express themselves and conduct cultural speech, which are the concrete manifestations of students' literacy externalization under the big culture theme-based teaching.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of the big culture community, the theme-based teaching takes the thematic knowledge as the index, establishes the connection of interdisciplinary knowledge around the foreign language subject, and forms a knowledge network with wholeness, relevance, and systematization by applying the knowledge to social life practice. This enables the learners to realize a broad vision, dynamic knowledge, and strong learning consciousness and motivation for efficient and profound cognition of the world and society. The theme-based teaching under big culture community overcomes the narrowness of a single cultural perspective and focuses on the aesthetics of language and the exploration of differences based on cultural commonalities, thus stimulating critical thinking that goes beyond the appearance of culture to the essence of culture, and cultivating talents with a broad vision, cultural sensitivity, sentiment, and the awareness as well as ability to dialogue. In general, big culture theme-based teaching is a comprehensive penetration of humanistic spirit in the philosophical level, emotional and value education in the aesthetic sense, linguistic cognition and application of language knowledge in the linguistic level, and multidimensional and cross-cultivation of language learning, discernment and learning ability under the guidance of cultural awareness in the pedagogy.

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