

# Strategies for Improving Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence in Junior High School English Teaching

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## Abstract

The trend towards globalization is intensifying and exchanges of countries all over the world is getting increasingly frequent. English, as a world language, is a bridge for communication with foreign countries. Using the language properly means not only mastering language competence, but also and above all understanding cultural differences, knowing the knowledge of using language and having the ability to communicate across cultures. Secondary education is an important stage for language learning. Most students can pronounce sentences smoothly but are unable to speak properly in different contexts. Lacking of intercultural communicative competence is the cause of communication breakdown[1]. Language and culture are integrated. The integration of culture into the English language teaching process can improve learners' intercultural communication competence. This article examines the importance of developing learners' intercultural communicative competence in junior high school English teaching. By analyzing the current problems of developing intercultural communicative competence, some strategies for developing learners' intercultural communicative competence in the classroom are proposed.

## Keywords

Junior high school English; intercultural communication competence; teaching strategies.

## 1. Introduction

The new curriculum for compulsory education clearly states that students' intercultural communication competence should be developed. The value of English as a linguistic tool used throughout the world requires an adequate understanding of the culture implicit in the language. The aim of English language teaching is to provide students with a comprehensive linguistic knowledge; students must understand the culture implicit in the target language and have intercultural communication competence in order to be able to use the language in an appropriate way.

## 2. Theories on intercultural communicative competence

Intercultural communication overcomes the cultural differences of different countries, nations, and groups to communicate effectively with others from a multidimensional perspective. Intercultural communication competence includes three dimensions: cognitive-behavioral (knowledge), psycho-emotional (attitudes) and operational (competence).

Intercultural communicative competence is the ability needed by people from different cultural backgrounds to communicate successfully across cultures. People with intercultural communicative competence are able to show positive emotions when participating in intercultural communication activities, recognize and respect cultural differences and have a

high level of intercultural sensitivity. It is the ability to use a second language to interact successfully with someone from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. People with the ability can use effective and appropriate linguistic and paralinguistic strategies to achieve the goal of communication between speakers of different languages. Since the successful use of a second language for communication usually occur between speakers with different cultural backgrounds, Wilson (1986) proposes the concept of "cross-cultural experiential learning," which means that language learners should put themselves in an environment where they are exposed to diverse intercultural inputs. Such environment would help students become interculturally aware of their own culture and the presence of otherness as well as to respect the differences among them. Therefore, the forming of this competence needs environment.

The aim of developing students' communicative competence and intercultural communication competence in teaching English to middle school students is to improve students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity to cultural differences; to develop students' understanding of foreign cultures with an open and tolerant attitude towards multiculturalism; to enrich students' cultural knowledge base and broaden their horizons; to improve students' intercultural communication. English course should aim at improving students' intercultural communication competence, ensuring effective and appropriate communication, developing their ability to communicate and cooperate with people from different cultural backgrounds and improving their ability to manage cultural conflicts and uncertainties. Foreign research on the development of intercultural competences started very early and has a long history, so that many intercultural courses have been set for students. In China, on the other hand, intercultural studies started comparatively late and the importance of intercultural communication competence was only recognized after phenomena such as culture conflict and culture shock emerged in the practice of cultural exchange, so that many intercultural courses have been added to foreign language courses in higher education stage, as well as set for English majors.

### **3. Importance of developing intercultural communication competence in teaching English**

Language is the vehicle of culture, and both have the same roots. To learn a language, it is necessary to understand the culture behind it in order to learn it well and make the most of it. The compulsory English curriculum standards clearly require students to be able to "use appropriate linguistic forms to express their feelings, attitudes and opinions according to the specific context of oral communication" and "use the learnt English to briefly introduce important Chinese and foreign cultures through oral or written expressions". Phenomena", etc. The trend towards globalization has intensified and increased cultural exchange and interaction between countries around the world. Intercultural communication competence is an important prerequisite for international exchange and cultural transmission. The development of intercultural communication competence is not something that can be achieved in very short period, but must be done at a level where there is some linguistic basis. Because of the different cultural connotations behind English and Chinese words, sometimes the same word will have different cultural characteristics or even completely opposite cultural connotations. The different values of China and the west exhibit their different ways of thinking, but also hinder the smooth progress of cross-cultural communication to a certain extent. Different speech acts between different cultures will bring people difficulties in communication. The development of learners' intercultural communication competence in the English classroom is of great practical importance, particularly in relation to the following two aspects. The first aspect is about cultural awareness. Middle school is the best period for starting to develop students' cultural awareness and helping young people to shape their values. It is the time to hook on their first button. The first step in developing intercultural communication

competence is for students to develop intercultural awareness, the ability to respect and understand other cultures, to cultivate their own awareness of understanding and respecting cultural differences and to help build their identification with the traditional culture of their own country. They should also be able to bring their own culture to overseas, talk to foreigners intelligently and appropriately, spread Chinese traditions, strengthen the international influence of Chinese culture and increase their cultural confidence. Select the essence and eliminate the gross when learning other cultures.

In terms of interest in learning, understanding the cultural roots of a language allows learners to learn about other Western ways of thinking so that they can change their ways of thinking and perceive things in a different way. When learning the language, the understanding of culture can greatly lower the level of difficulty of learning a language. The cultural context of a language can be a great help in teaching, as opposed to merely transmitting words, grammar and syntax. Incorporating cultural context can make foreign language teaching more interesting and meaningful.

The second aspect is about using language. Learning about the cultural traditions, habits and customs of different countries can help to broaden your horizons. Change linguistic thinking patterns, encourage critical thinking, improve the effectiveness of English learning and create a foundation for future learning and communication. Chinese and foreign cultures are very different. Chinese people, for example, like to talk about daily life as a way of greeting. They like to ask some questions like, Where do you go? Have you eaten yet? What do you do? Unlike Chinese, foreigners like to talk about the weather, for example: It's a nice day, isn't it? It's a beautiful day, isn't it? There are also some differences in using words. Cultural differences between countries mean that words of equal meaning are used very differently. In China, some words or proverbs that speak of "dog" are often criticized for, say. But western culture still believes that dogs are loyal, so the dog literally means a happy little creature. Through an interesting comparative analysis, they help students to better understand linguistic differences due to cultural differences and deepen children's lexical understanding. So if you don't understand cultural differences in Chinese, there is a great risk of misunderstandings and communication barriers. The language as a communication tool will not be able to play a valuable role. It is important to acquire knowledge about the use of the language, to use it sensibly in different contexts, to avoid cultural conflicts and to make the most of the communicative function of the language.

#### **4. Current situation and reasons for developing intercultural communicative competence in English teaching.**

Middle stage students are in adolescence with a strong desire for exploration and a high level of curiosity about foreign cultures. However, due to the pressure of further education, they mainly focus on studying textbooks without expanding their interests. Under the influence of various factors, they have formed a fixed and conservative learning style. Over the long term, it is not conducive to the improvement of English cross-cultural communication ability, and a series of learning problems may also arise<sup>[1]</sup>. There is little interaction between teachers and students in the classroom, which makes it difficult to improve speaking and writing competence in English, and teaching is not very effective. Currently, the English learning environment in secondary education is relatively one-sided and most language situations are limited to books. Teachers do not create language practice situations for students in terms of real life and cultural connotations, which does not improve students' intercultural communication competence. This can be observed in the following three areas.

#### **4.1. Cultural objectives are neglected in lesson design.**

Students have little cross-cultural knowledge reserve. Students are less sensitive to cultural differences. The curriculum states that students should develop intercultural competences, but in practice most teachers still focus on language competences and only focus on scores. Most secondary school teachers have no experience of going abroad, little experience of intercultural communication and lack intercultural awareness. Examination-oriented learning objectives are the focus of teachers' attention and, in practice, they pay more attention to the systematic teaching of important sentence patterns, sentence forms, vocabulary and grammar. They cannot implement the concept of intercultural learning well and attach great importance to exam results without caring about whether learners really understand a certain English sentence pattern and grammar. And there is little or no exposure to the culture and linguistic environment of English-speaking countries in their own classrooms. Or, because of the intensive curriculum, limited class time and heavy homework assignments, there is no opportunity for cultural expansion. Over time, learners will feel that English classes become boring and meaningless. And the intercultural objectives are difficult to achieve. In most cases, teachers intends but are unable to teach the cultural objectives part by part. Students lack intercultural experiences and do not have the opportunity to communicate with each other. Therefore, over time they get used to keep silence and find it difficult to communicate in English and a phenomenon like "silent English" arises. The main reason maybe because that most teachers lack intercultural communication competence, have not updated their teaching philosophy, have not studied the textbook thoroughly and are under time pressure when teaching course, which makes it difficult to implement intercultural teaching.

#### **4.2. Lack of cultural elements in the learning content.**

Most English teachers in our country have not lived abroad, and their cross-cultural communication experience is acquired indirectly through books, literature and other materials, which still has a certain gap with the real cross-cultural communication. Teachers play a leading role in teaching. They are unable to explore some authentic teaching material for improving students' language ability as well as their cultural communicative competence. In addition to mastering language knowledge, teachers should strengthen the study of cross-cultural knowledge, improve cultural literacy and teaching ability. Teachers rely heavily on the textbook and limit the teaching content to the content within textbook, therefore elements of foreign culture are relatively scarce in the textbook. They focus on grammatical points, vocabulary and sentence structure. Possible intercultural elements of the texts are not explored in depth and are often omitted in the explanations. Take the English reading course as an example , it aims to cultivate students' ability to obtain information in English. However, students seldom train their intercultural communicative competence in reading class. English language ability and cross culture awareness are relatively weak. In the reading teaching process, they often pay attention to the cultivation of language knowledge and reading ability and ignore the teaching of cultural knowledge, which is likely to make the cultural differences between China and the West become an obstacle to reading, resulting in the inability to improve students' overall reading ability. It is sometimes observed that students read the text without problems of vocabulary and grammar and with fluency, but they do not interpret the meaning of the text fully and correctly and only superficially understand the meaning of the words and cannot apply them. There is also a lack of cultural resources that can be used after class. Cultural penetration is lacking and students have little cultural knowledge. Materials include a textbook as well as supplementary multimedia materials which are not fully used by the teacher to provide an immersive learning environment for students.

### 4.3. Outdate teaching methods

Teachers themselves have little intercultural knowledge and are not aware of the need to update their pedagogy to develop intercultural communication competence. The teaching method is one-sided, with indoctrination and an expository teaching style, with the result that students do not play a central role in the classroom and have little opportunity for intercultural practice. For example, traditional teaching of reading focuses on the teacher's explanations and students have less time to interact with the teacher. The phenomenon of "silent English" emerges, oral and communicative competence are weak and English classes are silent and boring. In reading classes, many closed questions are asked and students have no opportunity to think and express themselves. Students lack authentic intercultural experiences and find it difficult to develop their thinking and cultural awareness. Language competence are taught without cultural context, students do not transfer knowledge to each other and their language competence cannot be improved. Due to the lack of real-life intercultural communication experiences, it is difficult for students to be aware of the possible misunderstandings in intercultural communication and the cultural factors behind the misunderstandings. As language errors are not corrected in a timely manner, it is difficult for students to develop sensitivity to cultural differences and improve their intercultural language competence.

## 5. Findings and discussions

Strategies for developing intercultural communication competences in English language teaching

### 5.1. Updating teaching concepts and designing learning objectives.

In order to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence, teachers should first of all innovate their thoughts. EFL teachers, who serve as the brokers between theories of interculturality and their applications in classrooms, are supposed to develop their intercultural communicative competence to build culturally responsive language classrooms and engage multicultural EFL learners, improve their own knowledge of intercultural communication, recognise the importance of intercultural communicative competence and the importance of learning English, strengthen their own global cultural competence, understand the use of English culture in English language teaching and improve their sensitivity to cultural differences in English language teaching. And of course, they should correctly perceive their role. Teachers play the role of "scaffolding" in the teaching process, aiming to cultivate students' intercultural communication awareness and pragmatic ability, enhance students' enthusiasm in learning a second language and reduce the burden of learning a foreign language. Language learning is not only about language exchange, but also about cultural exchange. Teachers need to combine language competence with culture in the teaching process to enhance students' intercultural literacy competence in a subtle way. Teachers should take into account intercultural communication elements in the design of objectives based on a good understanding of the requirements of secondary English teaching. It is important to consider whether the teaching objectives are aligned with the elements of intercultural competence<sup>[2]</sup>. To develop intercultural communication competence students must be equipped with a rich stock of intercultural knowledge. It is important to learn both the knowledge of the language and the cultural meanings and values that the language carries, as well as the need to stock up on pragmatic knowledge and to understand the culture of communication. Knowledge of foreign cultures must be infused into the teaching of vocabulary, sentence patterns and grammar. Vocabulary can convey culture and the same words have different meanings in different contexts. When teaching discourse, it is important that students understand the meaning and lexical nature of words and that they are also taught that the rules of using word



in other contexts to avoid ambiguity. For example, in Western culture, white is seen as a symbol of beauty and purity, implying purity and innocence, and white is the main color of Western weddings; yellow, for example, is a symbol of nobility and royalty in Chinese history, but in the English context it has a melancholy and painful meaning. Many vocabulary words have cultural connotations, but junior high school students lack the awareness to dig deeper into the cultural connotations of vocabulary. Teachers can introduce cultural content related to vocabulary in an interesting way and organize students to dig deeper into the cultural connotations of the vocabulary<sup>[3]</sup>. Teachers should elaborate and analyze vocabulary with special cultural contexts in order to ensure that junior high school students can develop their intercultural communication competence in an orderly manner. The educational administration should provide teachers with corresponding opportunities to learn. They are responsible for inviting foreign experts to give relevant lectures or providing communication competence training for English teachers, and if conditions permit, it can also organize teachers to go abroad for exchange visits.

## **5.2. Developing teaching methods and organizing intercultural communication activities.**

The use of appropriate teaching methods plays a role for both teachers and learners. The development of intercultural communication competence is based on students' understanding of a foreign culture; it is therefore important to create as many opportunities as possible for students to have language experiences. In contact with other cultures, it can be difficult to accept a foreign culture because of cultural differences. Teachers should enable students to perceive foreign cultures positively and to view them critically, with an appropriate perspective. The language, customs and values of the West are very different from those of China. In teaching, it is necessary to emphasize the differences between Chinese and Western cultures so that students can overcome communication barriers. The influence of environment on language learning is always hidden. A strong cultural atmosphere can produce a good use for language learning. In the process of learning mother tongue, people have a lot of opportunities to learn and practice their mother tongue. However, in the process of learning English, most students have few opportunities to communicate with foreigners outside of class, and the classroom is the main occasion for them to practice English. Therefore, English teachers should not only make good use of the textbook content and strengthen the training of various competence, but also strive to create an image of the Western scene for students in the classroom, so that they can feel the influence of language and culture.

Internet technology should be utilized to support teaching and learning. PowerPoint lessons are used in class to visually demonstrate culture and enhance students' understanding of material in English. Multimodal teaching increases students' interest in intercultural communication. Multimodal resources are used to show students images and objects representative of Western culture in order to increase their interest in the history and customs of the English language. Students can also use PPT program to present and demonstrate the richness and depth of the cultural elements of English vocabulary. Show documentaries, films, TV clips and animations to familiarize students with foreign languages and cultures and improve their understanding of other cultures. Teach students to use the Internet to gather information and to apply information technology to create realistic situations.

In order to effectively integrate the concept of cross-cultural communication into middle school English teaching, English culture must be integrated into extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities have always been an important platform for students to expand their skills and acquire knowledge<sup>[4]</sup>. It is necessary to develop flexible and varied learning activities to arouse learners' interest in learning so that they are motivated to sincerely understand the foreign culture and implicitly learn multicultural elements through practical learning

experiences to enhance the effect of integrated English language learning. Organize enriching activities after reading, e.g. role-plays, interviews, etc. These can successfully transfer learning from reading to speaking and from input to output. Teachers provide additional cultural context during classroom teaching. Thematic questions are posed and learners can apply their intercultural knowledge to solve intercultural problems under the guidance of the teacher. For example, after learning a reading class themed on holiday, students can be given the task of collecting information after class and creating a handwritten journal on the topics of Thanksgiving abroad and the Dragon Boat Festival in China. During the production process, learners can experience cultural differences by comparing cultures. Provide opportunities to simulate conversations. English and Chinese have different rules for language use. After reading, design role-play activity to create realistic situations in which learners can apply what they have learned, simulate the use of authentic linguistic expressions, put acquired cultural knowledge into practice, deepen cultural connotations and meanings, and improve learners' intercultural awareness and communication competence. Guide students to role-play some classic English plays and try to consider the dialogue background and deeper meanings of different characters to further enhance their cultural literacy and thinking<sup>[5]</sup>. Students are able to experience the way of thinking and expression in the target language during role-play activities and develop cross-cultural awareness. The scenario-based simulation enhances understanding and sensitivity to cultural differences between Chinese and foreign cultures and improves intercultural communication competence. Students use English to communicate in real-life situations, learning English expressions, conversational habits, as well as tone and intonation. Students gain communicative experience in English in the process, gaining a better understanding of the cultural differences between China and the UK and enhancing their intercultural communication competence<sup>[6]</sup>. Some activities like English speech competitions, comparing traditional Chinese and Western cultures, can encourage students to collect and compile information and express their opinions, creating lasting learning motivation for intercultural awareness. Students can also engage in intercultural study activities outside school and go out into the community to experience cultural differences first-hand through contact with strangers and practice their intercultural communication competence.

Divide small groups and learning together. Before class, students can work in small groups to gather information and share the results of their group discussions so that they can experience cultural differences in information gathering, group discussion and class presentation. Encouraging students to express their opinions freely in small groups without pressure, this not only improves students' ability to express themselves in a foreign language, but also gives them the courage to use the language.

### **5.3. Creating an intercultural communicative environment**

The teacher can teach by immersive English teaching to create an intensive conversational environment for the students and actively encourage them to communicate interactively in spoken English. Complex and difficult points can be translated into Chinese only when it is necessary, and students are encouraged to read some foreign famous literary works in English. Given the rapid pace of cultural exchange and integration, we find many cross-cultural elements in our daily life, such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, etc., which are very popular in China. Teachers can take the opportunity to use these intercultural elements found everywhere to develop students' intercultural awareness. Encourage students to participate in role-play activities in which students use English for intercultural communication in different roles to reinforce their language competence and deepen their understanding of the content of the books and increase their intercultural awareness.

#### 5.4. Rational development of resources and selection of intercultural materials.

Textbooks are the basis for achieving educational goals and these goals are incorporated into the textbook based on the goal of promoting students' intercultural exchange skills. Therefore, the teacher can rely on the textbook and the teaching material, and develop the intercultural communication skill of the student by acquiring the basic knowledge of the textbook. In order to improve students' English language skills and develop their cross-cultural communication skills, current English textbooks increase the basic knowledge of western customs, history, geography, and human relations, and facilitate teachers' lessons. Besides, the reading teaching occupies a very important part of English language teaching and reading materials for learning English are relatively numerous and varied, with many texts containing knowledge of the cultural context of representative Western countries. Reading materials contain a great deal of cultural knowledge, such as the customs, social conditions, and political history of many countries. Teachers should consider these materials holistically, use them creatively, study them in depth and explore the intercultural elements they contain. Life and hobbies of students should be considered when decide teaching materials. Emphasizing the integration of language learning and cultural background knowledge can effectively cultivate students' cross-cultural communication awareness, skills, strategies, etc., and overcome the shortcomings of traditional English teaching in middle schools.

But limited knowledge of culture discourages intercultural communication. Perhaps there are some tips that can be used to help listening sites abroad. Teachers should recommend some listening websites for students to learn authentic language materials, hear real voices, and imitate them. Or encourage students to read foreign news, learn about local politics, or support local culture. Guide students to read some original English novels, news materials, etc., so that they can gradually understand the history, art, finance and other cultural knowledge of Western countries. In addition, dialogue and communication can also be carried out with students on some Western cultural topics, so that students can express and communicate the cultural knowledge read through oral English, and effectively improve their comprehensive application ability.

#### 6. Conclusion

There are many things that are important in the process of learning English. The results of intercultural communication based on the integrating of culture and language and changes in classroom teaching models. At the same time, cultural popularization should not be excessive, and it should be matched with hard knowledge education time to have a good matching effect<sup>[10]</sup>. Teachers should design various extracurricular activities for intercultural understanding of articles, enrich and maintain their use and promote communication. There is still a long way to explore how to coordinate language and culture in teaching and how to allocate the proportion of language content and cultural content in teaching. The solution of these problems depends on the continuous exploration and efforts of teachers in the future teaching.

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