A Study on the Cultivation of University Students' Competence of Introducing Chinese Culture Based on Cultural Awareness

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Abstract. In a time when global interconnection is indispensable, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures is essential, especially for students who need to navigate varied cultural environments. This study examines the intercultural communicative competency (ICC) of Chinese university students, specifically aiming to improve their proficiency in introducing Chinese culture in English. By utilizing a mixed-methods approach, incorporating questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations, to assess the efficacy of current English Language Teaching (ELT) tactics, this study aims to discover more efficient methods for incorporating Chinese cultural components into the curriculum. The research evaluates students' present levels of intercultural competence and their proficiency in comprehending and expressing intricate cultural ideas by examining both quantitative and qualitative data. Results indicate a notable deficiency in students' cultural proficiency, mainly attributable to insufficient exposure to culturally related material and a deficiency of organized occasions for discussing and contemplating their own culture. Based on these observations, the research attempts some changes in English Language Teaching towards a more equitable incorporation of both "Big C" and "Little c" cultural aspects. The goal is to improve students' understanding of different cultures and their ability to communicate effectively in cultivating a culturally inclusive learning environment, thus equipping students to effectively serve as proficient cultural intermediaries in a globalized society.

Keywords: English Language Teaching (ELT); intercultural communicative competency (ICC); cultural awareness

1   Introduction

In today's globalized context, effective intercultural communication is essential for fostering understanding and cooperation across different cultures. This is particularly crucial in foreign language education, which not only enhances personal and academic growth but also contributes to a nation's global influence and cultural soft power. This study focuses on Chinese university students and their role in promoting Chinese culture internationally, addressing the phenomenon known as "Chinese cultural aphasia".

Despite English fluency, these students often struggle to articulate their cultural heritage due to an educational emphasis on target cultures, a deficiency in Chinese cultural content within curricula, and a lack of developed critical cultural awareness and communication skills[14][15].

To mitigate these issues, there is a pressing need to shift English Language Teaching (ELT) towards integrating more Chinese cultural elements and enhancing students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Drawing inspiration from Byram's ICC model, this research advocates for strategies that embed culture-centric activities, enhance cultural diversity appreciation, and teach intercultural communication and translation skills[9]. Crucially, it emphasizes the distinction between "Big C" culture — encompassing history, literature, and the arts — and "Little c" culture, which includes everyday practices and values. By understanding and comparing these cultural facets, students can better appreciate their cultural identity and more effectively bridge cultural divides.

Employing a mixed-methods approach involving surveys, interviews, and classroom observations, this study aims to assess the current capabilities of Chinese university students in presenting their culture and to identify effective methods for enhancing their ICC. The findings are intended to provide actionable insights for ELT professionals and policymakers, contributing to the broader discourse on fostering intercultural competence among students in China and promoting global cultural exchanges.

2   Literature Review

Understanding cultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is pivotal in equipping university students to introduce Chinese culture effectively. Cultural awareness involves recognizing the similarities and differences between one's own culture and others, crucial for navigating intercultural interactions[1][2]. ICC, defined by Byram, refers to the ability to communicate appropriately across cultures, encompassing attitudes, knowledge, and various intercultural skills. This competence is essential for students in a globalized educational context to engage meaningfully across diverse cultural settings[3]. The concepts of "source culture", "target culture" and "international target cultures" differentiate between the student's native culture, the culture associated with the language being learned, and the global contexts where the language is used, respectively.

Byram's ICC model and the differentiation between "Little c" culture (subtle cultural aspects such as values and communication patterns) and "Big C" culture (obvious cultural elements like literature and art) are seminal works in this domain. Byram's model is integral to developing a structured approach to ICC, featuring interrelated dimensions that guide learners through understanding and interaction processes in multicultural settings[7][10]. Both frameworks emphasize a comprehensive cultural education, encouraging a deep understanding of both visible and subtle cultural traits.

Despite the importance of ICC, many Chinese students face "Chinese cultural aphasia", a difficulty in expressing Chinese cultural concepts in English, which stems from an overemphasis on Western cultures within ELT and a lack of focus on integrating

Chinese culture into the curriculum. This gap often results in limited intercultural communication skills and a lack of critical cultural awareness[4][8]. Research by Hou has shown that students struggle to convey traditional Chinese cultural elements, highlighting the need for a curriculum that better incorporates Chinese cultural content[6].

The prevailing focus on Western cultures in China's ELT materials has contributed to a perceived inferiority of Chinese culture among students and a dominance of English-speaking cultural references. This imbalance can hinder the development of ICC and the effective introduction of Chinese culture in international settings[5][13]. Scholars like Nechifor and Borca (2020) advocate for a more balanced cultural representation in teaching materials to foster a stronger cultural identity and self-confidence among students[6][12].

To counter the challenges of cultural aphasia and promote a more balanced cultural education, it is crucial to incorporate a greater representation of Chinese cultural elements in language teaching materials and practices. Enhancing students' exposure to their own culture alongside international cultures can significantly improve their ability to function competently in intercultural dialogues and foster a more inclusive global perspective[11][16].

These findings underscore the need for ELT to evolve towards a more inclusive approach that emphasizes both global and native cultural elements, enabling students to navigate and bridge cultural divides effectively. Incorporating a balanced cultural perspective in language education is crucial for developing students' ability to function competently in diverse intercultural dialogues, enhancing global communication and understanding.

3   Methodology

3.1   Research Design: Mixed-Methods Approach

This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively explore the competence of Chinese university students in introducing their native culture and to identify effective strategies for cultivating their intercultural communicative competence (ICC). A mixed-methods design is particularly suitable for this research as it integrates both quantitative and qualitative methods, enabling a robust analysis that encompasses the breadth and depth of the research questions.

3.2   Quantitative Study

Objective:

This study aims to assess the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of Chinese university students, focusing on their ability to communicate Chinese cultural concepts in English and their cultural awareness within an academic setting.

Context and Background:

The study is conducted within non-English majors in a university of China, involving 45 students enrolled in an advanced English language course. These students are

primarily sophomores and juniors who have been exposed to both English language and cultural studies courses.

Methods:

A. Survey questions:

A structured questionnaire was developed to measure the students' ICC based on validated scales. The survey included questions related to:

- How to enhance Self-reported competence in expressing Chinese cultural concepts in English?
- How to cultivate Students' awareness of their own (source) culture and English-speaking (target) cultures?
- How to Evaluate the effectiveness of cultural content in their English courses?

B. Sample Selection:

The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method to ensure they had sufficient exposure to both language instruction and cultural content. The group of 45 students provided a manageable cohort for detailed analysis and facilitated follow-up discussions.

C. Data Collection:

The survey was administered during regular class sessions, with prior consent obtained from students and instructors. Paper-based surveys were chosen to encourage thoughtful responses and ensure completeness in an environment familiar to the students.

D. Data Analysis:

Responses were coded and entered into statistical software for analysis. Descriptive statistics provided insights into the overall levels of cultural awareness and communicative competence. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and correlation analysis, were conducted to explore the relationships between students' ICC levels and their academic and cultural backgrounds.

E. Results:

Preliminary results indicated that while most students felt confident in their general English language abilities, there were significant gaps in their confidence and ability to effectively communicate specific Chinese cultural concepts in English. Notably, students reported a higher level of competence in discussing global cultural themes than those specifically related to Chinese culture, suggesting a potential underemphasis in localized cultural content within the curriculum.

3.3   Qualitative Study

Context and Background:

A university in China is looking to enhance its English language curriculum by integrating more comprehensive cultural content. To this end, a qualitative study is conducted with students enrolled in advanced English courses to gather in-depth feedback on the existing curriculum and identify areas for improvement.

Methods:

A. Sample Selection:

Ten students are selected for interviews based on their responses to the initial survey, representing different levels of competence in intercultural communication, academic disciplines, and years of study. This diversity ensures a broad understanding of the student body's experiences.

B. Data Collection:

- Interviews are conducted in a quiet room within the university's language school, with each session lasting approximately 40 minutes. Questions posed to the students include:
- "Can you describe a situation where you successfully or unsuccessfully used English to share Chinese cultural concepts?"
- "What aspects of the cultural content in your English courses have been most helpful or challenging?"
- "What improvements would you suggest for integrating Chinese cultural concepts into the English curriculum?"

C. Data Analysis:

The interviews are transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis is employed to extract key themes. Initial codes such as "cultural expression challenges", "curriculum gaps" and "suggestions for improvement" are developed. These codes help in identifying overarching themes that could inform curriculum development.

D. Outcomes:

The analysis reveals that while students appreciate the inclusion of cultural content in their courses, they often find the materials either too superficial or heavily skewed towards Western perspectives. Many express a desire for more in-depth exploration of complex Chinese cultural elements, such as philosophical ideas and historical contexts, to better equip them for intercultural communication.

4   Findings and Discussion

4.1   Students' Attitudes Towards Learning and Introducing Chinese Culture

Survey results indicated that a significant majority of Chinese university students (78%) are enthusiastic about learning and sharing Chinese culture, recognizing the importance of integrating cultural elements into their English language education. This enthusiasm supports previous findings highlighting the value of incorporating source culture into language instruction. Additionally, 72% of students expressed a willingness to share their cultural heritage with international peers, showcasing a proactive approach to cultural exchange. However, student interviews revealed challenges such as limited vocabulary and a lack of confidence in expressing complex cultural concepts in English, a dilemma known as "Chinese cultural aphasia", suggesting a need for enhanced language support.

4.2 Level of Cultural Awareness and Competence

The findings showed mixed levels of cultural awareness among students: 62% demonstrated a solid grasp of Chinese cultural elements and could discuss cultural similarities and differences effectively, while 38% had a more superficial understanding. Classroom observations varied, with some students articulately discussing Chinese cultural topics in English, whereas others struggled, often resorting to simplifications. This variance points to the need for more focused educational strategies to improve cultural competence.

4.3 Influential Factors on Students' Cultural Competence

Three primary factors influencing students' ability to introduce Chinese culture effectively emerged from the study:

Language Proficiency. Higher English proficiency correlated with better cultural expression. Students with greater language skills expressed more confidence in discussing Chinese culture in English, aligning with literature emphasizing the importance of language proficiency in effective intercultural communication.

Cultural Knowledge. Extensive knowledge of Chinese history, literature, and traditions boosted students' confidence in cultural discussions, emphasizing the need for a strong educational foundation in Chinese culture.

Intercultural Communication Skills. Students with advanced intercultural communication skills, often enhanced by experiences like study abroad or international projects, demonstrated greater ease in cultural discussions, underscoring the importance of practical intercultural experiences.

4.4 Strategies to Enhance Cultural Competence

Curriculum Integration. To enhance the effectiveness of English language teaching, it is crucial to integrate comprehensive Chinese cultural content into the curriculum. This strategy involves using a diverse array of texts and media — from traditional literature to contemporary multimedia — to enrich students' exposure to their own culture.

Critical Cultural Awareness. To foster critical cultural awareness, educational programs should be designed to encourage the detailed examination of both Chinese and international cultures. By critically engaging with various cultural perspectives, students can deepen their understanding and transcend stereotypical views.

Cultural Diversity Appreciation. To cultivate appreciation for cultural diversity, educational initiatives should implement activities that promote cultural empathy and respect. Engaging students in cross-cultural dialogues and role-playing exercises can significantly enhance their openness and effectiveness as cultural ambassadors.

Communication Skills and Translation Training. To enhance students' ability to engage in nuanced cultural exchanges, targeted instruction in intercultural communication techniques and translation strategies is essential. This training should focus on equipping students with the skills to accurately interpret and convey cultural nuances, enabling them to serve as effective intermediaries between cultures.

5   Conclusion and Implications

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the competencies of Chinese university students in introducing Chinese culture, highlighting significant implications for curriculum design and educator training. The research underscores the crucial balance between source culture, target culture, and international cultures in English language curriculums to foster students' cultural identities and competencies in cultural introduction. It is recommended that curriculum developers enrich language teaching materials with diverse Chinese cultural elements, ensuring students can effectively convey their cultural heritage.

Three elements could be employed into course design for enhancing cultural proficiency in language learning. Firstly, teachers play a pivotal role in cultivating cultural awareness and competence. Enhancements in teacher training programs are vital, focusing on developing teachers' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and cultural awareness through immersive experiences and specialized training in intercultural communication theories and strategies. Continuous professional development opportunities should also be available to teachers, allowing them to stay abreast of the latest educational strategies and cultural insights. Furthermore, the curriculum should encourage active student engagement with both Chinese and international cultures through structured comparisons and analyses. This approach will help students develop a nuanced understanding of cultural differences and similarities, enhancing their ability to engage in meaningful intercultural dialogues. Additionally, classroom practices need to integrate culture-based activities that utilize authentic cultural materials to deepen students' cultural understanding and language skills. Schools should support initiatives that promote intercultural exchanges and study abroad programs, providing practical experiences that are invaluable for developing students' intercultural competencies.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of a systemic and integrative approach to cultural education that involves comprehensive curriculum development, teacher training, innovative classroom practices, and robust institutional support. By adopting these strategies, educational institutions can better prepare students to act as competent cultural ambassadors on the global stage, thereby enhancing China's soft power and fostering greater intercultural understanding and cooperation internationally.

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