

Research on Chinese Senior High School English Textbooks from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication: A Case Study of the Compulsory Modules of People's Education Edition

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Abstract

This paper, based on Byram's model and 2017 high - school English curriculum standards, studies People's Education Edition high - school English compulsory - module texts. It analyzes their coherence in themes, difficulty, and cultural integration, as well as intercultural content distribution. The paper proposes four ways to cultivate intercultural skills in teaching: emphasizing communication authenticity, critical thinking in textbook selection, promoting traditional culture, and deepening Western - culture understanding. It also suggests optimizing textbook intercultural content to foster globally - aware talents.

Keywords

Intercultural Communication; Senior High School English; Compulsory Textbooks of People's Education Edition.

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication is an essential part of English teaching and plays a vital role in students' professional development. Language learning is a process that involves crossing languages and cultures [1]. Language learning and cultural learning are inseparable [2]. In the current context of globalization, exchanges among countries in economic, cultural, and other fields are becoming increasingly close, making intercultural communication a key link in these exchanges. As the core medium of intercultural communication, language learning and teaching have been entrusted with new missions and requirements[3].

English, as one of the most widely used languages globally, plays a pivotal role in international communication. For senior high school English teaching, it is necessary not only to enable students to master solid language knowledge and skills but also to cultivate their intercultural communication ability, allowing them to communicate and interact effectively in a multicultural environment[4]. Textbooks, as an important carrier of English teaching, bear the dual functions of knowledge imparting and cultural dissemination[5]. The People's Education Edition senior high school English textbooks are widely used in senior high school English teaching in China, and their content arrangement and design have a profound impact on the cultivation of students' intercultural communication ability. However, in current English teaching practice, there is a tendency to emphasize language knowledge and neglect intercultural teaching, failing to fully unleash the potential of textbooks in intercultural education. Based on this, a thorough analysis of the intercultural communication content in the People's Education Edition senior high school English textbooks and the exploration of strategies for optimizing teaching are of great practical significance for improving the quality of senior high school English teaching and cultivating students' intercultural literacy.

2. Literature Review of Intercultural Communication Ability

2.1. Intercultural Communication

In the academic community, there is still no consensus on the definition of the concept of "intercultural communication ability". Scholar Spitzberg pointed out that intercultural communication ability refers to "a behavior that is both appropriate and effective in a specific context"[6]. Byram emphasized that in the communication process, both parties should not only be able to understand each other's beliefs, concepts, or behaviors but also maintain their own views[7]. Perry and Southwell believed that "intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds"[8]. Comparatively speaking, the author agrees more with Byram's view. Intercultural communication ability, as the name implies, refers to the process of transmitting and interpreting information among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It involves not only language communication but also the interaction of many cultural elements such as non-verbal behaviors, values, and ways of thinking. Although scholars have different expressions regarding intercultural communication, they generally agree that intercultural communication ability mainly consists of three elements: sufficient intercultural knowledge, positive communication motivation, and effective communication skills. "Effectiveness" and "appropriateness" are the core standards of intercultural communication ability [9]. In this paper, the concept of cultural teaching is based on the model of cultivating intercultural communication ability, which has broad and profound significance for integrating intercultural communication into middle school English teaching.

2.2. Theoretical Framework of Intercultural Communication

Byram believes that foreign language education in middle school is an important way to cultivate intercultural communication ability[10]. The model of intercultural communication ability (ICC - Intercultural Communicative Competence) he proposed in the 1990s is considered the most explanatory theoretical framework for intercultural foreign language teaching and has great influence in foreign language education. This model divides intercultural communication ability into four dimensions: knowledge, skills, attitude, and critical cultural awareness[11].

The model of intercultural communication ability proposed by Byram includes the following four dimensions:

(1) Knowledge: It encompasses the understanding of one's own culture and the target culture, covering social norms, values, historical backgrounds, etc. Byram emphasized that knowledge is not just the accumulation of static information but also needs to be combined with dynamic cultural interaction situations, such as communication conventions and symbol systems in different cultures[12].

(2) Skills: It involves practical operation abilities in intercultural communication, such as the ability to explain and relate different cultural phenomena and the ability to flexibly adjust communication strategies[13]. Specifically, it includes language skills (such as multilingual communication), non-verbal skills (such as the interpretation of body language), and strategies for resolving cultural conflicts.

(3) Attitude: It refers to the learner's openness and curiosity towards different cultures, including the willingness to suspend the inherent perception of one's own culture and understand and accept cultural differences with an inclusive attitude. Byram believed that attitude means "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" [14].

(4) Critical Cultural Awareness: This is the core innovation of Byram's model, referring to the learner's ability to critically evaluate the values and behavior patterns of one's own culture and different cultures and to reflect and take action based on this. This awareness emphasizes that

learners should not passively accept cultural differences but should actively participate in cultural dialogues and become cultural mediators [15].

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Corpus and Methods

The research corpus of this paper mainly consists of the compulsory parts (Books 1 to 5) of the student books in the NSEFC senior high school English textbook series published by the People's Education Edition. Each book contains five units, and the unit content includes Warming up, Pre-reading, Reading, Comprehending, Learning about Language, Using Language, Summing Up, Learning Tip, and the workbook attached at the end of each book. The representative text content is the reading section in the textbook, which is mainly distributed in Reading (intensive reading), Reading in Using Language (extensive reading), and the Reading Task in the Workbook. These reading passages are developed around the themes of each unit and carry corresponding cultural information, which are the core corpora of this research. In addition, the activity task texts in the textbook are also within the scope of this research, which are used to analyze their role in cultivating intercultural communication ability. By reviewing relevant theories of intercultural communication (such as Byram's standard framework) through the literature review method, this paper provides a theoretical basis for analyzing the cultural content and activity tasks of the People's Education Edition senior high school English textbooks, clarifies the evaluation criteria and the text analysis method. For the selected textbook texts, the reading-related texts are analyzed from the perspectives of cultural types (target language culture, source language culture, world culture, other cultures, and multiculturalism) and cultural content. According to Byram's standard framework, the activity task texts are classified and evaluated to measure the task content of intercultural communication ability and the degree of attention paid to each aspect.

3.2. Research Questions

- (1) Does the English textbook of People's Education Edition include the intercultural communication knowledge specified in the General Senior High School English Curriculum Standard (such as cultural politics, history, mass media, and the religious beliefs of English-speaking countries, etc.), and does it contain intercultural content to enhance students' understanding of intercultural knowledge?
- (2) To what extent does the arrangement and distribution of the reading and activity texts in the English textbook of People's Education Edition help cultivate students' intercultural communication awareness and ability?
- (3) Is there coherence and progressiveness in the arrangement of the reading and activity texts in the English textbooks of different grades of People's Education Edition in terms of theme selection, difficulty setting, and the integration of cultural elements?

3.3. Research Results

3.3.1. Distribution and Presentation of Intercultural Communication Content

(1) Knowledge Dimension: In the compulsory textbooks of People's Education Edition senior high school English, the knowledge dimension is mentioned 48 times, accounting for 40.7%, which is the most frequently mentioned among the four dimensions. Among them, "understanding the main litterateurs, artists, scientists, and politicians of countries such as the UK and the US and their achievements and contributions, and learning from and drawing on the excellent achievements of human civilization" accounts for 31.3% of the total knowledge content. For example, Unit 2 of Compulsory 1 introduces Samuel Johnson and Noah Webster and their dictionary works, helping students understand the differences between British

English and American English; Unit 3 of Compulsory 2 tells the history of computers and Turing's contributions. However, there is relatively little introduction of knowledge about the mainstream sports in the UK and the US and other aspects in this dimension. For example, "understanding the mainstream sports in countries such as the UK and the US and perceiving the common demands of sports spirits at home and abroad" only accounts for 4.2%.

(2) Skills Dimension: It is mentioned 30 times in total, accounting for 25.4%. "Understanding the differences and integrations between Chinese and foreign cultures and preliminarily demonstrating the appropriateness and effectiveness of communication in intercultural communication" accounts for 40.0% of the total skills content. For example, through the study of Body Language in Unit 4 of Compulsory 4, students can master the intercultural body language communication skills. However, "learning and preliminarily using English to introduce Chinese traditional festivals and China's excellent traditional culture" only accounts for 16.7%, indicating the insufficiency of content related to the skills of spreading Chinese culture.

(3) Attitude Dimension: It is mentioned the least number of times, 13 times, accounting for 11.0%. "Preliminarily perceiving and experiencing the beauty of the English language in learning activities" accounts for 46.2% of the total attitude content. Texts such as Unit 4 of Compulsory 1 and Unit 1 of Compulsory 2 allow students to feel the beauty of the language through unique language expressions. "Understanding and appreciating the beauty of the expression forms of the English language (such as rhythm, etc.) in learning activities" accounts for only 23.1%, which is relatively low.

(4) Critical Cultural Awareness Dimension: It is mentioned 27 times, accounting for 22.9%. "Understanding the cultural backgrounds of the common expressions of English words; comparing with the similar expressions of Chinese words, enriching historical and cultural knowledge, and understanding the deep meanings of words from an intercultural perspective" accounts for 37.0% of the total awareness content. For example, the interpretation of the cultural connotations of relevant words in Unit 5 of Compulsory 3 and Unit 4 of Compulsory 5. "Understanding the main mass media of countries such as the UK and the US and analyzing and distinguishing their value orientations" only accounts for 7.4%.

From the vertical distribution of each module in the textbook, the content of intercultural communication in the knowledge dimension is involved but uneven. There is more relevant content in Compulsory 4 (36 items), and less in Compulsory 5 (10 items). Overall, the textbook focuses on knowledge reserve and needs to be strengthened in terms of emotional attitude sublimation and real scene experience.

3.3.2. Correlation between the Arrangement of Intercultural Communication Content and the Cultivation of Ability

(1) Lack of Systematic Arrangement of Content: The intercultural communication knowledge in the curriculum standard is unevenly presented in the textbook, and some content is only briefly touched upon. For example, in aspects such as cultural politics and religious beliefs, although they are involved, they are not in-depth and systematic. From the perspective of cultural types, the target culture (the culture of English-speaking countries) accounts for a relatively large proportion, while the source culture (Chinese culture) accounts for a small proportion. Only some texts in "Unit 1 Festivals around the world" of Compulsory 3 introduce Chinese traditional festivals, accounting for 4% of the total number of units. In terms of unit distribution, "Introduction to National Humanities and History" is involved in 12 units, accounting for 57.14%, while the selection of materials in dimensions such as "Social Behavioral Norms" is scarce. For example, the content related to this dimension in "The Million Pound Bank Note" in Unit 3 of Compulsory 3 only accounts for 4.76%.

(2) Limitations in Cultivating Intercultural Communication Awareness and Ability: The textbook plays a certain role in cultivating students' intercultural communication awareness and ability, but there are limitations. In terms of awareness cultivation, although it can enable students to understand some cultural differences, it is insufficient in cultivating critical cultural awareness. For example, there is less content such as the analysis of the value orientations of the mass media in the UK and the US. In terms of ability cultivation, there is a lack of training in the ability to spread Chinese culture in English in the skills dimension. Most of the articles related to cultural content in the textbook are introductory, and the lack of real scene experience makes it difficult for students to improve their intercultural communication ability in practice.

3.3.3. Coherence and Progressiveness of the Arrangement of Textbooks in Different Grades

(1) Theme Selection: The themes of textbooks in different grades are somewhat related, but there is a lack of progressive depth. For example, the complexity of themes shows a hidden progression. The lower grades (Compulsory 1-2) focus on personal life fields (family, school), and the higher grades (Compulsory 4-5) extend to topics such as technological ethics (cloning technology) and global issues (cultural heritage protection). However, the way of integrating cultural elements is still mainly "appendix-based" (supplemented by cultural columns), and there is no in-depth integration of themes and cultural cognition. For example, themes related to cultural figures and cultural phenomena are involved in all grades, but a system from shallow to deep and from single to comprehensive has not been formed. For example, for the introduction of cultural figures in the UK and the US, as the grade level increases, there is no expansion to a more in-depth discussion of the cultural background and influence.

(2) Difficulty Setting: There is a certain upward trend in the overall difficulty, but there is an obvious disconnection in the design of the cultural cognition gradient. For example, a comparative analysis shows that "The Million Pound Bank Note" in Unit 3 of Compulsory 3 and "The United Kingdom" in Unit 2 of Compulsory 5 both belong to the theme of the target language culture. However, the former focuses on the surface understanding of literary works, and the latter involves deep issues such as national identity, and there is a lack of necessary cognitive transition scaffolding in between.

(3) Way of Integrating Cultural Elements: The way of integrating cultural elements is relatively single, mainly through the introduction of reading texts. There is a lack of diverse and coherent ways of presenting cultural elements among different grades. For example, students are not allowed to gradually understand and apply intercultural knowledge through a series of activity tasks or project-based learning at different stages. The distribution of task types shows a tendency of "emphasizing knowledge over practice". Knowledge acquisition tasks (matching cultural facts, extracting information) account for 58.6%, while intercultural skills training (role-playing, resolving cultural conflicts) only accounts for 23.4%. The cultivation of the "attitude dimension" in Byram's model mainly relies on the open discussions set in the textbook (such as the comparison of first aid ethics in Unit 5 of Compulsory 5 "First Aid"), but there is a lack of a systematic guidance framework; there is a structural lack in the cultivation of critical cultural awareness: only the activity tasks in 8 units (accounting for 16%) involve cultural comparison and analysis (such as the comparison of post-disaster response methods in "Earthquakes" in Unit 4 of Compulsory 1), and most of them stay at the level of fact description, and advanced thinking activities such as "cultural stance criticism" and "deconstruction of stereotypes" have not been designed.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Optimizing the Arrangement of Intercultural Content in Textbooks

(1) Systematic Reconstruction

Based on students' cognitive development laws and knowledge reserve situations, systematically sort out and integrate the intercultural content in textbooks. Build a clear knowledge framework, for example, classify and arrange it according to cultural themes (cultural politics, history, mass media, etc.), so that intercultural knowledge presents a logical system that progresses step by step from shallow to deep. At the same time, increase the correlation between cultural knowledge to help students form a systematic intercultural knowledge network and improve the systematicness and coherence of learning.

(2) Modern Transformation of the Expression of Local Culture

Increase the presentation of the source language culture (Chinese culture), and show China's excellent traditional culture in a modern and diverse way. For example, use modern media materials, case stories, etc., and combine current social hot topics and students' real-life situations to integrate traditional culture with modern life.

(3) Phased Connection in the Cultivation of Intercultural Competence

Clarify the cultivation objectives of intercultural competence for each grade to achieve effective connection among different school stages. In the lower grades, focus on the accumulation of basic cultural knowledge and the preliminary perception of cultural differences. In the higher grades, emphasize the in-depth understanding of culture, critical analysis, and the comprehensive application of intercultural communication skills. By setting progressive learning tasks and activities, such as starting from simple cultural information collection and comparison, and advancing to complex cultural case analysis and intercultural project practice, gradually enhance students' intercultural competence.

4.2. Improving Teaching Methods to Cultivate Intercultural Communication Ability

(1) Emphasize the Authenticity of Intercultural Communication and Focus on the Intercultural Communication Experience in Simulated Scenarios

Create a rich variety of real intercultural communication scenarios. Utilize multimedia resources, role-playing, online international exchange programs, and other means to enable students to communicate and interact in simulated or real intercultural situations. For example, organize video exchanges between students and their foreign peers of the same age, and carry out simulated activities of intercultural business negotiations, etc., so that students can personally experience the process of intercultural communication and improve their practical application ability. At the same time, guide students to pay attention to the cultural connotations and communication rules behind the language during communication to enhance their intercultural awareness.

(2) Pay Attention to the Critical Thinking of the Selected Texts in the Textbook to Help Students Form Positive Values

Carefully select reading texts with critical thinking, covering different cultural viewpoints and perspectives. Guide students to deeply think about, analyze, and evaluate the content of the texts. In the teaching process, organize activities such as group discussions and debates for students, encourage them to express their own opinions, and cultivate their critical thinking ability. Through the critical thinking about different cultural phenomena, help students form positive and objective values, and enhance their intercultural understanding and tolerance ability.

(3) Promote China's Excellent Traditional Culture and Inspire Students to Enhance Their Cultural Confidence and Pride

Strengthen the penetration of China's excellent traditional culture in teaching. Not only increase the relevant proportion in the textbook content, but also guide students to deeply explore the essence of Chinese culture in teaching activities. For example, carry out English speech and writing competitions with the theme of Chinese culture, and organize students to create English handwritten newspapers and short videos introducing Chinese culture. Through these activities, stimulate students' love for local culture, enhance their cultural confidence and pride, and at the same time improve their ability to spread Chinese culture in English.

(4) Deepen the Depth of Intercultural Learning and Promote Students' In-depth Understanding of Western Culture

In the process of high school English teaching, teachers tend to introduce cultural knowledge as an accessory to the teaching content, believing that cultural knowledge is dispensable embellishment. Even if there are cross-cultural teaching contents in the class, they merely offer scattered and superficial introductions to British and American cultures[15]. Guide students not to stay at the understanding of the superficial phenomena of Western culture, but to deeply explore its cultural roots, social background, and value system. Cultural thematic studies, academic lectures, and other forms can be carried out to enable students to systematically study and research Western culture. For example, conduct in-depth analysis of themes such as Western religious culture and political systems to help students understand the deep connotations of Western culture, avoid cultural misunderstandings, and promote in-depth understanding and effective communication of Western culture.

5. Conclusion

In the context of deep globalization integration, intercultural communication ability has gradually become an essential quality for standing on the world stage and is also a key stronghold of middle school English teaching. Taking the compulsory textbooks of People's Education Edition senior high school English as the breakthrough point, this study, with the help of Byram's theory of the Intercultural Competence (ICC) evaluation model and in close combination with the General Senior High School English Curriculum Standard (2017 Edition), has carried out a comprehensive and multi-level analysis of the intercultural communication content in the textbooks. The research results clearly reveal that there are still weaknesses in the People's Education Edition senior high school English textbooks in terms of intercultural communication. In the presentation of intercultural knowledge, the textbooks lack systematicness and balance, and the attention and dissemination of Chinese culture are weak. In cultivating students' intercultural communication awareness and ability, there is an obvious lack in the cultivation and practical application of critical cultural awareness. In the arrangement of textbooks for different grades, the lack of coherence and progressiveness in theme selection, difficulty setting, and the integration of cultural elements restricts the steady improvement of students' intercultural competence.

As the core carrier of English teaching, textbooks bear an irreplaceable mission and potential. Based on the problems discovered in this study, targeted suggestions for optimizing the arrangement of intercultural content in textbooks and improving teaching methods have been put forward, aiming to fully activate the educational value of textbooks and effectively enhance their effectiveness in cultivating students' intercultural communication awareness and ability.

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