

Bridging the Gap: Addressing Challenges and Advancing Strategies for Cultivating Core Competencies in Senior High School English Education

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Abstract: The integration of core competencies into senior high school English education has become a central objective of China's ongoing curriculum reform. These competencies-encompassing language ability, cultural awareness, thinking skills, and learning strategies-represent a paradigm shift from knowledge acquisition to holistic learner development. Yet, despite policy-level emphasis, classroom implementation faces several persistent obstacles: superficial understanding of core competencies among teachers, teacher-centered pedagogies, limited opportunities for authentic language use, and narrowly defined assessment systems. This paper analyzes these challenges in depth and offers strategic recommendations, including enhancing teacher professional knowledge, promoting inquiry-based instruction, expanding experiential learning, and building comprehensive assessment frameworks. The aim is to support English educators in fostering students' communicative competence and intercultural literacy in meaningful, engaging ways.

Keywords: Core Competencies, Senior High School English Education, Teacher Professional Development.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, English education in China is expected to serve more than just instrumental purposes-it must also cultivate students' communicative competence, critical thinking, cultural literacy, and lifelong learning capabilities. These expectations are clearly articulated in the *General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision)*, which positions "core competencies" as the guiding framework for English instruction.

However, a substantial gap remains between the curriculum's intent and its classroom execution. Many English teachers struggle to operationalize the concept of core competencies, and teaching practices often revert to traditional routines shaped by exam-oriented culture. In this context, reimagining instructional models, learning environments, and evaluation systems becomes essential.[1] This paper investigates key obstacles and provides actionable strategies for transforming classroom instruction in line with competency-based goals.

2. Key Challenges in Implementing Core Competency-Based Instruction

2.1. Conceptual Ambiguity among Teachers

Despite frequent references to "core competencies," many English teachers lack a coherent and operational understanding of its components. [2] "Language ability" is often narrowly interpreted as mastering grammar rules or vocabulary lists, while "cultural awareness" is reduced to memorizing holidays or trivia about English-speaking countries. Without a deep conceptual grasp, instructional goals risk becoming fragmented, and teaching may fail to integrate language use with intercultural knowledge, critical inquiry, or strategic learning behaviors.

2.2. Persistence of Teacher-Centered Pedagogy

In many high school English classrooms, the structure of instruction remains rigidly hierarchical: teachers dominate discourse, and students respond passively. Lessons often revolve around textbook interpretation and test drills, leaving little room for exploratory or student-led learning. Such patterns not only stifle learner autonomy but also weaken opportunities for collaborative communication or problem-solving-two pillars of core competency development.

This teacher-centered paradigm is deeply embedded in the traditional examination culture, where accuracy and speed in handling standardized exercises take precedence over deeper engagement with language. As a result, class time is frequently consumed by grammar parsing, model essay memorization, and vocabulary dictation, with little emphasis on negotiation of meaning, spontaneous expression, or critical questioning. Students, accustomed to playing the role of recipients rather than participants, often hesitate to take linguistic risks or voice personal perspectives, particularly in large classes where speaking up may feel intimidating.

Moreover, classroom interaction patterns are typically characterized by the IRF sequence-Initiation, Response, Feedback-where the teacher initiates a question, a student responds (often in brief, rehearsed phrases), and the teacher provides evaluative feedback. This rigid structure leaves minimal space for student-to-student dialogue, peer scaffolding, or divergent thinking. Consequently, communicative competence, especially in authentic, unpredictable contexts, remains underdeveloped.

To break this cycle, a shift toward dialogic, inquiry-oriented instruction is essential. Encouraging students to generate questions, make predictions, and co-construct meaning can transform the classroom into a space where language is not only learned but lived and experienced. [3]

2.3. Lack of Authentic Language Contexts

The development of communicative competence depends

on frequent exposure to rich, context-sensitive language use. Yet current classroom activities frequently simulate rather than replicate authentic tasks. Role-plays are formulaic, writing assignments are overly structured, and oral interactions are limited to fixed dialogues. [4] More importantly, students rarely engage with language outside the classroom, and few schools institutionalize extracurricular opportunities that foster real-world communication.

2.4. Assessment Practices Misaligned with Competency Goals

Assessment remains heavily reliant on discrete-point, summative tests, emphasizing grammatical accuracy and reading comprehension at the expense of discourse-level performance, pragmatic use, or reflective thinking. Moreover, feedback is often delayed or minimal, and students rarely engage in self-evaluation or peer assessment. The absence of diverse assessment forms weakens instructional alignment and undercuts learners' ability to track their own growth.

One of the cornerstones of core competency cultivation is learner autonomy—the capacity of students to manage, evaluate, and direct their own learning. Reflective practice plays a key role in fostering such autonomy. By engaging students in systematic reflection on their goals, strategies, challenges, and progress, teachers can cultivate metacognitive awareness and self-regulation, both of which are critical elements of lifelong learning.

Practical strategies include the use of “learning journals,” where students document what they have learned, questions they have, and strategies they find effective. Teachers can also facilitate guided reflection through sentence stems such as “Today I realized that...,” or “Next time, I would try...” Digital tools like Seesaw or Padlet can also be used to create online reflection spaces.

Importantly, reflection should not be limited to language form. Students should be encouraged to reflect on the social and cultural content of their learning, the effectiveness of collaboration in group tasks, or their emotional engagement with a topic. When reflection is built into the learning process, students are more likely to become self-directed, strategic learners who are prepared to continue developing their competencies beyond the classroom.

3. Strategic Responses to Strengthen Core Competency Instruction

3.1. Enhancing Teachers' Pedagogical and Conceptual Literacy

Building a professional knowledge base around core competencies is the first step toward reform. Teacher development programs should prioritize not only definitions of each competency domain but also practical models of integration across tasks, units, and assessments. Workshops, peer observations, and collaborative lesson planning are especially effective in contextualizing theory into local teaching realities. [5]

Implementation Tip: Initiate school-based professional learning communities (PLCs) where teachers co-analyze textbook content, design competency-oriented tasks, and conduct peer feedback sessions after classroom trials.

3.2. Promoting Student-Centered, Inquiry-Based Instruction

Shifting from content delivery to inquiry-driven learning empowers students to become co-constructors of knowledge. Instruction should be structured around open-ended questions, real-world scenarios, and tasks requiring interpretation, negotiation, and reflection. When students explore topics that matter to them and are encouraged to make choices in how they demonstrate understanding, language becomes a means of agency, not mere performance.

Example: In a unit on technology and social media, students conduct mini-surveys on digital habits among peers, synthesize findings, and present solutions to “screen addiction” in group presentations. This builds data literacy, oral fluency, and collaborative planning.

3.3. Embedding Language Learning in Real-World Experiences

To bridge the **classroom**-society divide, schools should institutionalize experiential learning programs. [6] These include English public speaking clubs, journalism projects, cultural ambassador roles, service-learning initiatives, and even interdisciplinary collaborations with science, history, or art departments. Through such endeavors, students apply English to complex, real-life tasks, deepening both fluency and socio-cultural understanding.

Example: Organize a “Bilingual Campus Tour” project in which students guide visitors through key school landmarks in English, drawing connections between school culture and broader educational values. Students write scripts, rehearse narratives, and adapt explanations based on audience.

An increasingly effective way to cultivate core competencies is through interdisciplinary instruction that blends English learning with other subjects such as history, science, technology, and the arts. This approach reflects the real-world use of language—not as an isolated skill, but as a tool for inquiry, collaboration, and expression across knowledge domains.

For example, a thematic unit on “Global Environmental Challenges” can incorporate scientific texts, infographics, and news articles. Students can analyze the causes of climate change, debate solutions, and write editorials or policy proposals in English. Such a unit fosters not only reading and writing skills but also critical thinking, civic awareness, and systems thinking—key components of core competencies (Beane, 1997).

Interdisciplinary projects also allow students to see the relevance of English in diverse contexts, increasing motivation and engagement. Moreover, collaboration between English teachers and colleagues from other disciplines encourages curriculum integration, resource sharing, and professional learning. This model aligns with international best practices in competency-based learning and has shown promise in pilot programs across several Chinese experimental schools.

3.4. Redesigning Assessment for Developmental Purposes

Competency-based assessment should evaluate not only what students know but also how they apply, reflect on, and improve their learning. Rubrics should encompass language accuracy, task completion, creative expression, collaboration, and self-management. Multiple modes of assessment—oral

defense, digital portfolios, performance tasks—must be integrated into the teaching cycle to provide continuous, meaningful feedback.

Example: In a writing unit on environmental issues, students draft persuasive essays advocating for local sustainability measures. Assessment includes peer feedback rounds, a teacher-scored rubric, and a final reflection on language choices and argument effectiveness.

3.5. Integrating Personal Practice: A Teacher’s Perspective

In my own teaching context at a public senior high school in Beijing, I have gradually shifted from a test-oriented paradigm to a more competency-driven instructional model over the past three years. One project that had a particularly profound impact was a cross-curricular unit titled “Telling China’s Story in English.” Students were asked to choose a traditional Chinese festival, investigate its cultural roots, interview family members or neighbors, and finally produce a bilingual video presentation introducing the festival to international peers. [7]Throughout the process, students not only honed their speaking and writing skills, but also developed cultural pride, team coordination, and multimedia communication abilities.

What impressed me most was how students began to take ownership of their learning. They discussed their ideas passionately, revised their scripts collaboratively, and even debated how to translate culturally specific terms like “团圆” or “粽子” accurately and meaningfully. This experience convinced me that core competencies are not abstract ideals—they come alive when learning connects to students’ lived experiences, interests, and identities.

A successful shift toward competency-based English instruction depends not only on instructional design but also on the broader classroom culture. A classroom that promotes trust, respect, risk-taking, and shared responsibility creates fertile ground for core competencies to thrive. Conversely, fear of making mistakes, overemphasis on correctness, and a competitive atmosphere can inhibit students from engaging authentically in communicative tasks.

Teachers can cultivate a competency-friendly culture by normalizing error as part of learning, celebrating diverse perspectives, and providing consistent emotional support. Strategies include establishing “collaborative norms” (e.g., listen actively, build on others’ ideas), using warm-up routines that encourage spontaneous speaking, and setting up routines for peer feedback that emphasize encouragement and constructive critique.

Moreover, when teachers model reflective thinking, curiosity, and intercultural openness, students are more likely to internalize these values. Classroom culture should not be viewed as an abstract or secondary concern—it is the medium through which core competencies are nurtured daily.

3.6. Strengthening Home-School Collaboration for Competency Cultivation

Another underexplored yet pivotal strategy lies in fostering robust collaboration between families and schools. Core competencies are not only cultivated within the classroom but also shaped by students’ broader learning ecologies. Parents, as co-educators, can reinforce values such as curiosity, persistence, and cultural openness through daily interactions, media consumption, and travel experiences.

However, many parents equate English learning with test preparation, overlooking its communicative and intercultural dimensions. To bridge this gap, schools can host parent seminars that explain the rationale and expectations of competency-based teaching. These sessions should include concrete examples of classroom tasks and provide strategies for supporting language learning at home, such as encouraging English-language media use, promoting journal writing, or engaging in family discussions on global topics.

Moreover, home-school partnerships can facilitate student projects that span both domains. For instance, a “Family Heritage Storytelling” unit might invite students to interview relatives about a family tradition, then present the story in English using digital tools. This not only builds oral fluency and narrative structure but also strengthens intergenerational bonds and cultural awareness.

By aligning home and school environments, students receive consistent reinforcement of the competencies they are meant to develop, making learning more coherent and sustained.

3.7. Cultivating Ethical Awareness Through English Learning

As part of developing global citizenship, core competencies must include ethical reasoning and moral awareness. English classes offer unique opportunities for students to explore ethical issues in multicultural contexts through texts, debates, and storytelling.

For instance, analyzing short stories or articles dealing with topics such as discrimination, environmental justice, or digital privacy can lead to thoughtful discussion. Students may be asked to write personal responses, engage in structured debates, or create social awareness campaigns using English. These activities not only build language skills but also foster empathy, ethical judgment, and civic responsibility.

Moreover, tasks like “Perspective Switching” help students write from another person’s point of view—e.g., imagining they are an immigrant student or an environmental activist. Such exercises deepen their ability to understand diverse perspectives and make value-based decisions, both of which are essential to functioning in a complex, interconnected world.

4. Conclusion

The cultivation of core competencies in senior high school English is both a pedagogical challenge and an ethical imperative. As language educators, we must design learning experiences that do more than prepare students for exams—they must prepare them for dialogue, diversity, and dilemmas in a globalized society. This shift requires more than curriculum documents or slogans; it demands a genuine reorientation of values, tools, and relationships in the classroom. Only when core competencies become embedded in the habits of teaching and learning can we realize the full promise of English education in the 21st century.

Moving forward, policymakers and researchers should collaborate to provide a more supportive ecosystem for competency-based English education. Firstly, national assessment systems must evolve to include performance-based tasks that capture students’ communicative and critical thinking abilities. Pilot programs can test the viability of portfolio assessments or project-based evaluation in selected schools.

Secondly, longitudinal research is needed to track the impact of competency-based instruction on learners' language development, cognitive growth, and social-emotional outcomes. Such research should include diverse school contexts-urban and rural, resource-rich and resource-limited-to inform equitable policy design.

Lastly, teacher education must be restructured to include intensive training on designing competency-oriented tasks, assessing discourse-level performance, and navigating classroom dynamics in student-centered settings. Partnerships between universities, research institutes, and local education bureaus can serve as platforms for experimentation, dissemination, and scalability.

Only through integrated, evidence-based reform can China realize its vision of cultivating globally competent, linguistically capable, and ethically grounded citizens.

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