

Research on the Cultivation of Cross-Cultural Awareness in High School English Reading Teaching

Zixuan Shi

China West Normal University, Nanchong, 637000, China

Abstract

English reading instruction plays a vital role in English language teaching, particularly in the high school stage where reading materials often encompass diverse cultural backgrounds. The revised 2017 edition of the “The New English Curriculum Standards” further emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural communication skills in English teaching. This study seeks to analyze the present state of high school students’ cross-cultural awareness and communication abilities, while also exploring the significance of fostering cross-cultural awareness through reading, as well as the challenges faced in this process. The study also provides suggestions to enhance students’ cross-cultural awareness and communication abilities.

Keywords

Cross-cultural Awareness; Importance; Suggestion.

1. Introduction

Reading allows students to learn about different cultures. In high school English teaching, reading is a very important part, which is a process that requires a lot of language input. Organically combining the cultivation of cross-cultural awareness with secondary school English reading teaching is both the need and the requirement of the times. In the 2022 edition of the new curriculum standard, cultural knowledge has been identified as part of the curriculum content score. It can be seen that both cultural teaching and cross-cultural awareness are very important in high school English teaching.

1.1. Research Background

In 2022, the implementation of new curriculum standards and the adoption of new textbooks have brought about a significant transformation in the field of English reading instruction. Previously, the emphasis was primarily on the acquisition of language knowledge, with little regard for cultural understanding. However, the revised English curriculum standards focus on the importance of integrating both language and cultural knowledge in English teaching. This necessitates that teachers not only develop students’ language skills, but also foster their values and beliefs through the teaching of English reading. Moreover, English teachers should strive to strike a balance between the practical and humanistic aspects of the English curriculum, ensuring that this integration becomes the norm in their instructional practices. To achieve this, teachers should leverage students’ cognitive abilities, age-specific characteristics, and existing knowledge structures, while also incorporating elements from their daily lives and broader cognitive levels. This approach will deepen students’ comprehension of the English language and expand their cross-cultural knowledge.

However, although the incorporation of cross-cultural communication skills in the middle school English curriculum standards is imperative, due to time constraints in English teaching, as well as the demands of college entrance exams and end-of-semester assessments in different regions, the teaching time for high school English classes is very tight. In classroom teaching, teachers will not spend too much time cultivating students’ cross-cultural awareness. teachers

may not be able to organically integrate the cultural connotations of each unit in the new textbooks, which leads to teachers emphasizing more on English knowledge and skills in the classroom, while neglecting the explanation of cultural knowledge behind language knowledge. Some teachers may not even be familiar with the cross-cultural knowledge related to English in the new curriculum standards, so they cannot meet the teaching requirements and pass on cultural knowledge to students.

To align with the current trend of educational reform, teachers must prioritize the reinforcement of students' cultural education and the cultivation of their cross-cultural awareness. Concurrently, it is essential to assist students in improving their comprehension of diverse cultural backgrounds, expanding their cultural consciousness, and broadening their cultural perspectives, so that students will be better equipped to comprehend foreign cultures and, consequently, enhance their English language learning.

1.2. Research Significance

Currently, reading instruction has become the main battlefield of English teaching. By engaging with reading materials, students can gain an understanding of different cultures and the environment they are in. In English teaching, reading instruction is an effective learning method that can enhance students' learning and improve their core competencies. During the reading process, students can acquire language and cultural knowledge that corresponds to the text and internalize, transform, and externalize it. However, due to the pressure of college entrance exams, teachers often attribute students' poor reading ability to a lack of vocabulary and language knowledge. As a result, many teachers place significant emphasis on elucidating and honing students' vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure proficiency, operating under the belief that an extensive command of lexicon, grammatical knowledge, and intricate sentence structures will invariably elevate students' English reading aptitude. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that students' reading comprehension proficiency is not solely contingent upon their accumulation of linguistic knowledge, but also on their personal experiences with English. Theoretically, the cultivation of cross-cultural awareness has the potential to foster further advancement in the realm of high school English education. Given the complexity inherent in the English curriculum system, encompassing teaching objectives, methodologies, content, and developmental targets, previous scholars have primarily focused on the linguistic aspects of the subject. Their research has predominantly centered around language skills and knowledge structures, while largely neglecting the crucial role that cultural literacy and cross-cultural awareness should play in the teaching of English. However, an examination of high school English reading instruction reveals the significance of bolstering the cultivation of cross-cultural awareness. This changes the previous research limitations that were confined to textbooks and teaching methods, placing the high school English curriculum in a broader perspective.

Pragmatically, it is imperative for high school English teachers to fully acknowledge the significance of cross-cultural knowledge and effectively incorporate it with language acquisition. Thus, this article, through various perspectives, strives to facilitate students' comprehension of the correlation between English culture and language, thereby enhancing their understanding of their own nation's culture, and fostering the preservation of Chinese culture, while also cultivating an appreciation for foreign cultures. Consequently, this approach aims to expand students' worldviews and instill in them a proper cultural and life perspective.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Studies on Cross-Cultural Awareness Abroad and at Home

2.1.1. The Studies on Cross-Cultural Awareness Abroad

In the annals of education about foreign languages, cultural teaching has traditionally occupied a subordinate position, often deemed expendable. Nevertheless, in the period spanning the 1980s to the 1990s, a surge in cross-cultural communication endeavors among nations fostered a paradigm shift, leading to the gradual integration and global recognition of cultural teaching within foreign language education, particularly in the United States and Europe.

In 1945, Fries, an expert in the field of language teaching in the United States, first proposed the incorporation of cultural teaching into foreign language education in his book "English Teaching and Learning," emphasizing the importance of cultural teaching in theory. He emphasized the theoretical importance of cultural teaching. Linguist Robert Lado (1957) further supported this idea in his work "Linguistics across Culture," advocating for cultural comparison and analyzing the differences in behavior between two distinct cultures in terms of form, meaning, and distribution. In his later publication "The Science of Language Teaching", he asserted that language teaching cannot be conducted successfully without a comprehensive understanding of the cultural background (Lado, 1964,P.12). He argued that culture is an integral part of language, and thus, true language acquisition is only possible when cultural patterns and norms are thoroughly comprehended. These works indicate that cultural teaching has gained significant attention and recognition in the field of foreign language education. In 1959, anthropologist Hall made a significant contribution to intercultural communication studies with his book "The Silent Language," which is often regarded as the seminal work that laid the foundation for the implementation of cultural teaching.

The research on cross-cultural communication has led to a growing understanding and appreciation for the importance of cultural teaching in foreign language education within the education sector and relevant teaching research institutions in the United States. In 1996, the U.S. Department of Education made revisions to the national standards for foreign language education, resulting in the latest modified curriculum that encompasses five goals, known as the "5C": Communication, Cultures, Connection, Comparisons, and Communities (Standards).

Since 1980, Europe has implemented various reforms in the domains of foreign language teaching and cultural education. Scholars like Michael Byram (1994) and others in the United Kingdom have devoted their efforts to enhancing learners' intercultural communication skills in foreign language instruction. Additionally, they have researched cultural teaching, which has garnered attention within Europe. Subsequently, in official documents after 1990, the British government explicitly declared that the primary objective of foreign language teaching is to develop students' language communication abilities, enable them to comprehend the essence and fundamental characteristics of language and acquaint them with the social and cultural knowledge of the target language country, along with its practical applications.

In summary, both the United States and the United Kingdom have emphasized incorporating cultural background knowledge into English teaching and have made efforts to enhance the exploration of cultural education. Yet, in terms of practical application, the study of cultural teaching has not established a comprehensive theoretical framework and is still undergoing refinement and progress. Several challenges exist, including insufficient data and ambiguous definitions. Consequently, further research is required to advance the cultivation of cross-cultural awareness.

2.1.2. The Studies on Cross-Cultural Awareness at Home

The emergence of cultural teaching in our nation occurred comparatively later, yet it has seen significant strides in research accomplishments. The escalating cross-cultural interactions and

transformations in foreign policies have fostered a growing community of scholars and educators dedicated to incorporating cultural instruction into foreign language teaching.

Luo Changpei wrote the book "Language and Culture" in early 1950, which includes various aspects of language and culture, and has always been regarded as a leader in the field of cultural linguistics in our country. Xu Guozhang, a distinguished scholar, presented a groundbreaking piece titled "Culturally-loaded Words and English Language Teaching" in the esteemed journal "Modern Foreign Languages." This seminal work serves as a pivotal milestone, signifying the commencement of cultural integration within foreign language education in our country. Xu Guozhang astutely identifies the intrinsic correlation between words embedded with cultural connotations and the instruction of English, while also advocating for the indispensability of historical, literary, and cultural knowledge in language acquisition across all nations.

Hu Wenzhong edited the book "Intercultural Communication and English Learning" which comprehensively explains intercultural communication, leading our country's intercultural education into a new era. Hu (1994) for the first time integrated the research results of domestic social and cultural linguistics, pragmatics, translation studies, teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and foreign language teaching in the fields of culture and communication, focusing on the relationship between culture and communication and the influence of culture on communication. It not only describes the current research status of intercultural communication at home and abroad but also discusses the close relationship between culture and communication through detailed language materials.

Deng Yanchang and Liu Runqing (1989) in their joint work "Language and Culture - A Comparison of English and Chinese Language and Culture" elaborated on the important cultural factors involved in the use of English based on the differences between Western and Chinese cultures, and discussed in depth the role of cultural background knowledge in language communication using a large number of examples. Additionally, Chen Shen (1999) offers a comprehensive overview of foreign cultural teaching methods in "Cultural Teaching in Foreign Language Education." Furthermore, Chen presents a historical perspective, outlining the implementation of cultural teaching in foreign language education and emphasizing the necessity to foster cultural creativity.

According to the English Curriculum Standards released by the Ministry of Education in 2003, it is explicitly stated that the integration and development of cultural awareness should be incorporated into high school English courses at various levels. Ni Qianheng (2014) emphasized the importance and effectiveness of incorporating cultural content and cultivating cultural awareness in high school English teaching. English reading teaching should not only focus on language knowledge, but also incorporate students' reading exercises into the corresponding cultural atmosphere, allowing students to carefully experience the happiness and achievements they feel while reading, and achieve the goal of improving students' reading level and ability.

Within the present educational landscape and diverse educational frameworks, the acquisition of English reading skills assumes a paramount role in the cultivation of students' intercultural communication proficiencies.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations

2.2.1. The Schema Theory

The emergence of the schema theory in cognitive psychology is a significant development. In 1980, psycholinguists incorporated this theory into the process of foreign language instruction, providing a comprehensive explanation of the psychological aspects of language learning. At its core, the schema theory refers to the knowledge system that students have already constructed, representing the way in which knowledge exists within their minds. According to this theory, students' learning process can be categorized into three distinct types of schema: the language schema, the content schema, and the form schema. Firstly, the language schema pertains to

students' comprehension of the target language knowledge they are acquiring. Secondly, the content schema encompasses students' familiarity with the topics covered in the text. Lastly, the form schema involves students' understanding of the genre, structure, and framework of the text.

Consequently, based on the schema theory, it is important to recognize that the language schema, content schema, and form schema are interrelated and interconnected. During the instructional process of reading, teachers should consider discourse as the fundamental unit and guide students to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the text's organizational structure from the perspectives of both content and form schema. This entails understanding the theme and writing techniques employed within the text before transitioning to the language schema. By delving into the intricacies of language, students can achieve a more profound integration of the three types of schema: form, language, and content. This holistic approach enables students to grasp the essential content and deeper meanings of the learning materials more accurately.

2.2.2. The Constructivist Theory

Constructivism, an integral part of cognitive theory, was introduced by Piaget in the 1960s and gained prominence in the mid-1980s. According to this theory, meaning is not detached from our existence. Instead, individuals tend to interpret and comprehend the real world based on their prior knowledge and experiences, rather than relying solely on the inherent nature of things.

The constructivist theory holds great potential in facilitating a more accurate understanding of the nature and techniques of cross-cultural communication. Therefore, in practical teaching, educators should fully utilize their role as guides and mentors, motivating students to perceive things subjectively and personally experience cross-cultural situations. Moreover, instructors should integrate personal circumstances and abilities to provide further explanations and evaluation of cultural phenomena. In other words, individual effort is required to foster the development of cross-cultural awareness.

Pre-reading: Before engaging in reading, it is essential to establish a foundation of background knowledge relevant to the material. Activating existing background knowledge effectively plays a crucial role in facilitating students' smooth understanding of the content.

Classroom learning: Before the reading class, students have already constructed some background knowledge under the guidance of the teacher. The classroom serves as a platform for students to merge their personal constructed knowledge with the reading material, continuously refining their judgments and reasoning. This process involves grasping and comprehending the article's content from both a macro and micro perspective, ultimately achieving comprehension. In this setting, teachers combine the content of the reading text to aid students in developing concepts of intensive reading and skimming. Furthermore, instructors encourage students to employ their imagination and utilize relevant information they have collected to engage in group collaboration, thereby enhancing the schemas in their minds.

Review after class: After completing pre-reading and classroom learning, students possess a general understanding and comprehension of the article's content. At this stage, teachers should seize the momentum and guide students to utilize their free time to supplement the limited teaching time in the classroom. By integrating extracurricular reading materials with the teaching content from the reading class, students can further internalize the construction of knowledge schemas. This will transform knowledge accumulation into a personal endeavor, ultimately strengthening their reading comprehension skills and improving overall effectiveness.

3. The Problem of Cross-Cultural Awareness in High School English Reading Teaching

3.1. Teachers' Insufficient Understanding of Cultural Education

In high school English instruction, the primary emphasis has historically been placed on imparting basic language knowledge. However, with the advent of various teaching methodologies, there has been a gradual shift toward developing language proficiency. Despite these advancements, the inherent limitations in language cognition have not been fully addressed. This cognitive deficiency not only hampers the humanistic function of language in education but also contributes to a deficiency and backwardness in cultural education.

While there are teachers who recognize the significance of cultural education, they often struggle to adequately incorporate it into their teaching due to a lack of cross-cultural experience and relevant guidance. Most teaching time is dedicated to English reading training, with culture often being overlooked or superficially addressed without any systematic connection. Many teachers resort to a didactic approach to cultural education, which fails to stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning and ultimately impacts their interest in the subject. Some teachers possess a vague understanding of how to effectively integrate language and culture into their teaching arrangements, resulting in an arbitrary approach to instruction.

3.2. The Autonomy of Students in Cultural Learning Is Not Strong

In the field of English language education, a significant number of students adopt a pragmatic approach toward learning English, wherein their primary focus lies in achieving a satisfactory score in examinations and considering grades as the sole indicator of their proficiency in the language. Consequently, the cultural dimension of English learning is often disregarded, as it is not encompassed within the examination framework.

When confronted with examinations, students typically rely on the knowledge imparted by their instructors and limit their study materials to textbooks and supplementary resources. Outside the confines of the classroom, students rarely exhibit a proactive attitude toward broadening their English proficiency and tend to display a lack of interest in exploring avenues that facilitate the acquisition of cultural knowledge. Their understanding of Western culture remains incomplete, and they do not actively employ English in their daily lives or engage with diverse cultures. Their comprehension of the intricate connection between culture and language is superficial and lacks depth. Within such an unfavorable environment, students' exposure to different cultures becomes limited, thereby impeding their potential to serve as cultural communicators.

4. The Importance of Cultivating Students' Cross-Cultural Awareness in Reading Instruction

4.1. Improve Students' English Reading Ability

Having a mature cross-cultural awareness during the reading process enables students to comprehend the intended meaning of authors when encountering contradictions between their cultural understanding and English articles. This awareness prevents students from being confused by cultural conflicts and allows them to analyze and comprehend based on their cultural background. Consequently, students can grasp the author's true intention and provide accurate answers to reading questions. Additionally, possessing cross-cultural awareness facilitates faster and more accurate comprehension of English articles.

Chinese and Western cultures differ significantly, not only in grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structures but also in specific expressions and thinking patterns. Developing a mature cross-cultural awareness while learning English enhances understanding of Western culture

and the disparities between Chinese and Western cultures. This, in turn, improves overall comprehension of English and facilitates easier understanding of the author's intended viewpoints during reading. Moreover, in the process of learning English, students can cultivate their authentic sense of the language, which is pivotal for improving English reading abilities.

4.2. Improve Students' Core Competence

In our country's education sector, the current focus is on three main goals related to students' core competence. These goals encompass six core competencies and eighteen basic elements, with culture being one of them. Consequently, high schools are required to adhere to the guidelines set forth by national departments in their English teaching practices. The aim is to continuously enhance students' core competence in English.

High schools must no longer perceive English teaching as a mere language tool subject, but instead recognize its significant role in education. English teaching should fulfill its educational purpose in practical instruction. At present, education at all levels in our country places utmost importance on "education" as the foundation and primary objective of all educational and teaching activities. The core competencies of the English curriculum encompass language competence, critical thinking, cultural awareness, and learning ability. These four elements form the fundamental components of the core competence within the English subject. Therefore, in high school English classroom instruction, emphasis should not only be placed on improving students' language skills and English learning abilities but also on cultivating their cultural awareness and critical thinking. However, in order to foster cultural awareness and critical thinking in English classroom instruction, it is essential for high school English teachers to teach students about Western culture with a balanced perspective.

In practical education, high school English teachers need to guide students in recognizing and embracing the merits and drawbacks of various cultures prevalent in real life. Specifically, they should direct students towards appreciating and assimilating the remarkable aspects of Western culture, while exercising discernment by discarding any undesirable elements. It is important to note that this emphasis on Western culture does not imply the abandonment of Chinese traditional culture. Instead, it aims to foster a comprehensive understanding of Western culture while instilling confidence in one's national heritage. Students should not perceive their own cultural identity as inferior following exposure to Western culture but rather develop a profound appreciation for their cultural roots.

The inclusion of English in our national curriculum is not solely to mimic foreign countries, but rather as a means to facilitate deeper and more convenient communication in today's globalized world. Consequently, high school students should actively utilize the English language to disseminate China's exceptional cultural values to a broader global audience, while simultaneously acquiring the necessary skills to engage in effective cross-cultural communication.

5. Strategies for Cultivating Students' Cross-Cultural Awareness in High School English Reading Teaching

5.1. Teachers Should Continuously Improve Their Own Cultural Awareness

English instruction encompasses not only the acquisition of language skills but also the assimilation of cultural knowledge. Consequently, English educators must possess a profound cultural acumen, as it significantly influences the efficacy of English education at the junior high school level. To effectively guide students in their English studies and foster their cross-cultural awareness during practical reading lessons, proficient English teachers must possess a genuine comprehension of both Chinese and Western cultures. Moreover, in the realm of reading instruction, English teachers should instill a sense of cultural self-assurance in students, guiding

them toward a correct understanding of Western culture. By facilitating comparative analysis of Chinese and Western cultures, English teachers can continually enhance students' cross-cultural communicative competence.

5.2. Cultivate Students' Cross-Cultural Awareness Through Extensive Reading

In the process of teaching, educators need to expand students' knowledge of various cultures. English as a subject encompasses a broad range of content, including literature, technology, and environmental concerns. When engaging in reading activities, teachers should appropriately supplement the relevant cultural information to ensure that students grasp the content of the articles comprehensively and accurately.

For instance, in the teaching of "English around the world," students must familiarize themselves with English culture. This culture exhibits significant differences when compared to Chinese culture, as evident in the varying meanings of English words. Thus, during reading classes, teachers can present additional materials that highlight substantial cultural disparities. After reading these materials, students can be encouraged to analyze them and gain a deeper understanding of these cultural variations. Through extended reading, students will notice that the word "dog" in English often carries connotations such as "sycophants" and "looking down upon others," whereas, in English-speaking countries, it is commonly understood as "dogs being humans' best friends." The divergence in cultural backgrounds gives rise to different interpretations of the same word in different nations. By engaging with such reading materials, students can develop cross-cultural awareness and recognize the disparities between various cultures. These disparities may arise due to political and geographical factors, ultimately fostering a respectful attitude towards different cultures and broadening students' horizons.

5.3. Cultivate Students' Cross-Cultural Awareness Through Reading Practice

Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth, and through extensive reading, students can acquire a vast amount of cultural knowledge. However, students need to assess the extent of their knowledge through practice. Hence, to enhance students' cultural literacy, teachers should actively organize cross-cultural practice activities in English reading, allowing students to personally experience the charm and value of English culture.

In the context of music teaching, students can be exposed to diverse music cultures to foster their cross-cultural awareness. In practical teaching, teachers can generate texts that depict Chinese and Western music cultures for students to peruse. After reading the texts, students can be prompted with questions such as "Who is your favorite singer?" When students respond, they can introduce musicians and music cultures from both domestic and foreign contexts. Moreover, since the formation of music culture is influenced by factors like nations, ethnicities, and politics, students will also gain more cross-cultural knowledge in this process, thereby deepening their comprehension of music culture and effectively nurturing their cross-cultural awareness and respect for diverse music cultures.

5.4. To Cultivate Students' Cross-Cultural Awareness in Cooperative Reading

Teachers play an active role in facilitating collaborative learning in the context of English reading instruction. By organizing students into group discussions, teachers enable them to explore topics such as local customs and the contrasting living habits of Eastern and Western societies. This approach promotes cross-cultural awareness among students. Additionally, in cooperative reading instruction, teachers can design questions that pertain to diverse cultural backgrounds, thereby guiding students toward specific learning objectives.

For instance, in the realm of Friendship teaching, students are encouraged to grasp the concept of friendship within both Chinese and Western cultures. However, given the varying interpretations of friendship in China and the West, teachers can employ cooperative learning methods to examine the dynamics between Chinese and Western friends in the classroom.

Throughout the process of cooperative learning, students have the opportunity to engage with a wide range of materials and acquire idioms and proverbs related to friendship in Chinese and English. By analyzing the attitudes towards friendship held by individuals from Chinese and Western cultures, we can discern the disparities in friendship and culture between them. Cooperative reading instruction empowers students to collectively tackle numerous reading challenges, ultimately enhancing their reading skills. Finally, teachers can elucidate students' research reports, guiding them in analyzing the cognitive differences regarding the friendship between China and the West. This process facilitates an understanding of the distinctions between Chinese and Western cultures while fostering students' respect and appreciation for diverse cultures and bolstering their cross-cultural awareness.

6. Conclusion

The development of cross-cultural understanding plays a crucial role in combatting stereotyping, eradicating biases, and facilitating effective cross-cultural communication. In the context of high school English education, English educators must emphasize the incorporation of Chinese exemplary culture into their teaching, establish accurate cultural perspectives, and foster progressive teaching principles. These efforts will enable high school students to gain a proper understanding of the essence of Chinese culture and enhance their identification with it. Moreover, within the realm of high school English instruction, teachers should heighten their awareness of the importance of cross-cultural education, integrate students' real-life experiences with teaching realities, and continuously enhance students' cross-cultural understanding through activities like extensive reading, reading practice, and collaborative reading. This will catalyze the growth of students' core competencies and equip them with genuine cross-disciplinary cultural awareness and skills, thereby molding them into versatile individuals with a global outlook.

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