

Study on Strategies for Cultivating Intercultural Communication Competence in Junior High School English Reading Instruction.

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Abstract

Reading lessons are an important component of English language teaching and serve as a significant avenue for fostering and developing students' cross-cultural communication abilities. This article explores the necessity of cultivating and developing cultural awareness as a core element and analyzes the current situation of middle school English reading classrooms. Addressing the existing issues and considering the requirements for nurturing English language talents, this article proposes strategies for cultivating cross-cultural communication skills in middle school English reading classrooms.

Keywords

Junior high school, Reading, Cross-cultural communication, Strategies.

1. Introduction

The core competencies of the English subject include language competence, thinking quality, cultural awareness, and learning ability, which encompass four dimensions. The globalized landscape imposes higher demands on students, with a crucial aspect being the cultivation of cultural awareness. This aspect determines students' cognition and behavioral orientation in cross-cultural communication.

The "National English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education" issued in 2011 explicitly defined the overall objectives of the English curriculum. It requires that students in the compulsory education stage be able to grasp the basic knowledge of English and develop a strong interest in English learning. The comprehensive language application abilities are further divided into five aspects: language skills, language knowledge, emotional attitudes, learning strategies, and cultural awareness. Cultural awareness encompasses cultural knowledge, cultural understanding, intercultural communication awareness, and competence. The introduction of the new curriculum standards aims to enable students in the compulsory education stage to learn foreign exemplary cultures while studying traditional cultures, thereby enhancing their understanding of both Chinese and foreign cultures. Cultivating the ability for cross-cultural communication is not only beneficial for students' understanding of their native language but also conducive to developing their divergent thinking.

In 2017, the Ministry of Education revised and issued the "National English Curriculum Standards for General High Schools". On one hand, it acknowledges the significant role of cultural awareness in students' learning during compulsory education. On the other hand, it places higher demands on general high schools in the context of globalization. This further confirms the importance of intercultural communication in cultivating students' cultural identity and confidence. Additionally, the document clearly outlines cultural awareness goals and reading teaching objectives. It emphasizes the cultivation of students' ability to apply knowledge and effectively enhances their understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures different from their own, fostering cultural sentiments, strengthening cultural confidence,

broadening their international perspectives, and gradually improving their communication skills, ability to learn continuously, and dialectical thinking.

Therefore, high school English education, built upon the foundation of compulsory education, aims to develop students' foreign language learning abilities through the reinforcement of knowledge application, situational communication, and analytical skills. It provides a favorable learning environment for students to study other subjects, absorb the essence of world cultures, and promote Chinese culture. Consequently, it is evident that cultural awareness cultivation is equally valued in high school English education, maintaining continuity with the learning objectives in compulsory education. Hence, it becomes even more essential to prioritize the development of this competency during the compulsory education stage.

2. Current Status of English Reading Instruction in Junior High School

In junior high school English classroom teaching, reading lessons are an important class type for cultivating students' core literacy. The rich reading materials in junior high school English textbooks contain a wealth of cultural knowledge and local customs, which help students understand foreign cultures. In recent years, with the advancement of education reform, teachers have gradually realized the importance of cultivating intercultural awareness in reading instruction, and there have been many practices and innovations across the country. However, under the current examination system, there are limitations in the content and format of English reading instruction, which pose certain restrictions on the cultivation of students' intercultural awareness.

(1) Emphasis on skill strategies and language knowledge

In the junior high school stage, the high school entrance examination is considered as the first important turning point in students' lives. The examination scores to some extent influence students' future development, which is also the aspect of most concern for students and parents. As a result, the focus of English classroom teaching mostly falls on the instruction of knowledge and skills related to the exam content. Teachers often use forms such as "answer the questions," "fill in the blanks," and "complete the passage" to teach students how to read articles and grasp some reading techniques and strategies. A whole class period is commonly used to teach important grammar points in the article, mark new words and phrases, and explain their usage and collocations. Overemphasizing the teaching of reading strategies and language knowledge, rather than the appreciation of language and culture during reading, can easily lead students to lose interest in reading lessons and even in learning English. Additionally, the mechanical teaching of grammar knowledge and patterned training have created a separation between the utilitarian and humanistic aspects of English. Students habitually use "Chinese translation" in their English expressions and fail to understand the differences between Chinese and English. For example, when encountering the phrase "rain cats and dogs," most students can only provide its meaning as "heavy rain," but they do not understand why "cats and dogs" are used in this idiom, and they have limited knowledge of the cultural stories behind idioms. Over time, English learning becomes a mechanical process of rote memorization, lacking its intended cultural connotations, and creating barriers between different cultures.

(2) The classroom mode is rigid

Due to the solidification of teaching content, the teaching mode of reading lessons has gradually become rigid, confined within the traditional teaching framework of "lecture in class, homework after class." In terms of classroom teaching, most reading lessons have formed fixed patterns. Common teaching models employed by teachers include the "Presentation, Practice, and Production" teaching model, the "Before reading, While reading, and Post reading" teaching model, among others. Skimming and scanning have now become the "standard" for reading lessons. After reading the article, teachers may engage students in discussions by posing open-

ended or semi-open-ended questions to enhance students' thinking and language expression abilities. However, in most cases, classroom discussions easily become superficial. Students seldom communicate in English during group discussions, and their responses often remain superficial, with different viewpoints among students not being deeply explored. Regarding homework, students are assigned predetermined exercises on a daily basis. The homework format is monotonous and lacks innovation and practicality, preventing students from applying what they have learned in class to practical situations. Furthermore, the currently advocated "differentiated instruction" model is also challenging to implement with a unified homework format.

Teaching in this fixed pattern for an extended period has resulted in students lacking real-world practical application, making it difficult for them to appreciate the beauty of the English language and engage with different cultures. Students' "Chinese-style thinking" is also challenging to transform.

(3) Cultural infiltration is shallow

In order to cultivate international talents, guided by the curriculum standards, English classroom teaching has gradually emphasized the infiltration of Western culture. Based on the content in the textbooks, teachers introduce students to some aspects of Western culture during English reading classes. In the classroom, students can experience the exotic customs and appreciate foreign cultures. However, these cultural infiltrations only stay at a superficial level, which reflects the current deficiency in cultivating students' cultural awareness in English teaching. The emphasis in English reading classroom teaching is more on cultural introduction rather than comparative analysis between cultures. Regarding the goal of cultural awareness, the teaching objectives in instructional design often focus on providing students with a basic understanding of Western culture. Teachers may briefly introduce relevant cultural background knowledge at the beginning or end of a class through texts, images, or videos. Apart from these introductions, teachers do not guide students to summarize and compare corresponding cultural aspects between the East and the West, analyze their similarities and differences, and explore the reasons behind them. Consequently, students lack a deeper understanding and appreciation of foreign cultures and may not develop a strong sense of identification and confidence in their own culture.

3. Strategies for Cultivating Intercultural Communicative Competence in Junior High School English Reading Instruction

In reading instruction, only by recognizing the value of cultural differences for students' effective comprehension can it be applied to the teaching process. Students can better utilize cultural knowledge to bridge cultural gaps, overcome barriers, avoid "cultural shock," acquire intercultural skills, and enhance their understanding of foreign cultures while developing a correct cultural mindset. Drawing on research findings from both domestic and international studies on English reading and the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence, the author proposes suggestions for junior high school English reading instruction in three stages: pre-lesson, in-lesson, and post-lesson.

(1) Strengthen teacher training in intercultural communicative competence and improve teachers' quality in reading instruction

Teachers are key figures in cross-cultural education and promoters of intercultural communication. The formation of students' intercultural communicative competence largely relies on the guidance of teachers. Therefore, it is crucial to enhance teachers' overall competence, particularly their cross-cultural knowledge and skills. To meet the needs of the new era's English curriculum reform, English teachers should strengthen their learning and cultivation of both Chinese and foreign cultures, enrich their own knowledge base, and be well-

equipped to impart knowledge to students. In the context of reading instruction, teachers should first ensure the provision of accurate and reliable cross-cultural knowledge, avoiding ambiguous interpretations, and enabling students to acquire precise and efficient cross-cultural knowledge. Secondly, teachers should encourage students to appreciate the differences in cultural thinking through reading texts. English and Chinese both have their unique cultural contexts. For example, there are significant differences in daily greetings, which reflect the disparities brought about by different civilizations. In the agricultural civilization, Chinese people commonly greet each other with questions about food, such as "Have you eaten?" or "What have you eaten?" It is considered normal. On the other hand, influenced by geographical conditions and unpredictable weather, the British greet each other by asking about the weather, saying, "How is the weather today?" Therefore, we should combine correct cultural background knowledge with cultural context to enable students to understand the linguistic and cultural environment, enhancing their sensitivity to cultural differences.

(2) Explore the cross-cultural knowledge within the teaching materials and select appropriate reading materials

Teachers should fully utilize the reading materials provided in the textbooks. Based on application opportunities and practical requirements, they should optimize and integrate textual resources, organize cross-cultural knowledge that aligns with the curriculum and examination standards, and explain to students the rich cultural information contained in the texts so that they can use it freely. If necessary, appropriate supplementary picture book resources can be added to enrich students' reading experiences and deepen their understanding of the corresponding cultural knowledge. Teachers can refine and expand the existing cultural sections in the textbook. They can incorporate cross-cultural knowledge teaching into discourse reading provided in the textbook and engage students in cross-cultural communication activities through role-playing or other forms, broadening their knowledge and fostering the development of a proper cross-cultural communication attitude. Additionally, in other thematic units, teachers should also explore the cross-cultural communication knowledge within and design communicative activities to encourage students' active learning and expressive communication.

(3) Introducing cross-cultural background knowledge in reading classrooms and creating a cross-cultural communication atmosphere.

Introducing cultural background knowledge in reading classrooms, including in the warm-up and pre-reading stages. In the warm-up stage, students can brainstorm ideas related to the topic, stimulate thinking and activate their existing knowledge. Additional audio and video materials relevant to the topic can also be included to provide context for the text. In the pre-reading stage, questions related to the reading text can be posed to guide students in predicting the content, comparing it to Chinese culture, and engaging in discussions. Definitions of culturally significant words can also be provided to eliminate reading obstacles. In the post-reading stage, students can be encouraged to share their thoughts, identify relevant cultural differences, or participate in cross-cultural communication activities by creating cultural contexts.

Due to the influence of cultural differences between the East and the West, different interpretations can exist for the same thing. For example, Western countries often consider "dogs" as humans' best friends, leading to the use of dog imagery to affirm certain human behaviors, such as "lucky dog" and "Love me, love my dog." In China, while dogs symbolize loyalty, there are also negative sayings such as "a dog biting Lu Dongbin" and "a dog meddling in others' affairs." These differences reflect the aesthetic and values disparities between Eastern and Western cultures. Therefore, when studying the unit on animals, the topic of "dogs" can be expanded to learn more about cross-cultural knowledge. Before the lesson, students can participate in a brainstorming session to generate as many meanings associated with "dogs" as

possible. During the lesson, the meanings associated with "dogs" in English culture can be introduced to students. After the lesson, students can be encouraged to make connections to their real-life experiences and develop a correct cultural mindset while understanding English culture.

(4) Enhancing sensitivity to cross-cultural knowledge by using reading themes as a guide.

According to Krashen, the best language input should be topic-based, where language input and topic theme are integrated and accompanied by each other. Only through the integration of both can long-term language learning lead to a complete language structure. Therefore, in reading instruction, the reading text should be the core, and a "theme cluster" should be established to create a context through topics, expand cross-cultural knowledge, cultivate communicative awareness, and construct unit lessons. This is specifically reflected in primary school English, where topics such as sports, weather, food, and modes of transportation can be used to organize students into small groups for discussions, explorations, and interactive exchanges of viewpoints. In this communicative process, the teacher guides students to continuously discover cross-cultural knowledge, explore the cultural depths of reading passages, and cultivate students' cross-cultural communicative thinking. By incorporating diverse cultural content under different themes, teachers can broaden students' cultural perspectives, enhance their sensitivity to different cultures, and foster a positive and inclusive attitude towards cross-cultural communication.

(5) Engaging in cultural comparisons related to the reading topic and fostering a positive attitude towards cross-cultural communication.

The primary goal of English teaching is to enable students to form their own cultural perspectives. Teachers should play a guiding role, guiding students to embrace cultural differences with an open mindset and learn and treat other cultures correctly. Comparison is one of the most effective ways to highlight differences, and teachers should analyze the characteristics of each culture through comparative analysis. In English reading teaching, teachers should also establish a connection between students' existing skills and Chinese traditional cultural elements, helping students build cultural confidence, develop the ability to use English flexibly in daily life, and cultivate a positive attitude towards different cultures. In the teaching process, teachers should emphasize the equality of cultures, consciously infuse the concept of relative culture, and guide students to approach different cultures with an objective, equal, and respectful attitude, understanding the values and cultural characteristics of others.

4. Conclusion

Language serves as a carrier of culture, and the process of learning a foreign language involves not only acquiring the language itself but also understanding its cultural implications and expressing oneself through language. Throughout the development of English teaching, the cultivation of intercultural awareness has gained increasing attention from researchers and educators. In English reading teaching, teachers also consciously stimulate students' cultural awareness. However, due to factors such as examination systems and language environments, the cultivation of cultural awareness is not the main point of reading classes. In order to cultivate students' intercultural awareness and enhance their cross-cultural communication abilities, teachers can make full use of the three stages of pre-class, in-class, and post-class activities. Through comparative analysis during each stage's investigative learning, students gradually develop a profound understanding of different cultures. Through the process of exploring and understanding different cultures, students can broaden their horizons and cultivate a character characterized by inclusiveness, thus growing into internationally competent talents required by their countries.

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