

Original Paper

Cultivation of Core Competences of English Major Students under the Inter-disciplinary Guidance A Case Study of “The Survey of British and American Culture” Course

Hanyu JIN¹, Dongxue HU¹, Liping YIN², Yi LI^{3*}, & Dan CUI^{4*}

¹ Postgraduate student of the School of English, Jilin International Studies University, Changchun, China

² Master of Education Management, Southwest University, Chongqing, China; Senior Teacher, Zhongshan Experimental Middle School, Zhongshan, Guangdong, China

³ School of Foreign Languages, Shenzhen Institute of Information Technology, Shenzhen, China

⁴ Doc Supervisor of Yanbian University, Yanji, Jilin, China; Doc of Literature, Professor, Dean of Institute of International Languages and Cultures, Dean of Romanticism Studies Center, Jilin International Studies University, Changchun, Jilin, China; Postdoc of Literature of School of English, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China

* Dan CUI, Corresponding Author, summerelephant@126.com

* Yi LI, Corresponding Author, 172790118@qq.com

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Abstract

The newly issued National Standards by the Ministry of National Education for the Quality of Foreign Language and Literature Teaching (hereinafter referred to as the “National Standards”) clearly points out that the curriculum system of foreign language majors should emphasize the cultivation of competences and the construction of professional knowledge, especially the cultivation of cross-cultural, critical, and innovative abilities. Therefore, in order to enhance college students’ autonomous study ability and cross-cultural skills, this study, based on the concepts of content and language integration, aims to explore the way to combine Willis’ outline of procedure for task-based learning with the five principles of intercultural teaching, and utilize task-based teaching method, and rely on the course—“British and American Culture: A Course to Develop Critical Thinking from a

cross-cultural perspective” to respectively consider the design of autonomous study worksheets for English majors before, during, and after class, so as to improve their autonomous learning ability, cultural critical thinking and intercultural communication skills. It will be helpful for the implementation of similar courses.

Keywords

content and language integration, autonomous study worksheets, cultural discernment

1. Introduction

Under the impetus of “National Standards”, foreign language teaching in China’s universities and colleges is undergoing a transformative revolution from a didactic culture focusing on knowledge inculcation and transmission and a test training culture to a discursive culture aiming at cultivating multiple competencies. The “Teaching Guidelines for Undergraduate English Majors in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions” requires the improvement and development of students’ autonomous study and critical thinking abilities. The textbook “British and American Culture: A Course to Develop Critical Thinking” composed by Zhu Zhenwu, belongs to the type of parallel teaching of culture and language knowledge, which is in line with the CLI education concept, that is, the teaching of language, knowledge, and culture is no longer separated. This course is designed for undergraduate English majors, who, unlike primary and secondary school students, are at a higher education level without the pressure of further education and in a more active classroom environment and academic atmosphere; they are already adults and have a high potential for independent learning and a more mature level of thinking. On the basis of combining previous theories, Sun Youzhong summarized the five principles of intercultural teaching, abbreviated as CREED, in 2016, including critiquing, reflecting, exploring, emphasizing, and doing, which are very helpful for improving the cross-cultural communication ability, cultural thinking ability, autonomous learning and exploration ability of foreign language professionals.

2. Key Concepts

2.1 Content and Language Integration (CLI)

Content-based Instruction (CBI), as an innovative language teaching methodology, was defined by Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989), as “the concurrent study of language and subject matter, with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content material”. Its creation enables the integration of content and language. However, the limitation of CBI lies in the lack of explicit instruction and corrective feedback. One solution that has been agreed in the academic field is to combine content with language learning, and so with this comes out the very hot pedagogy in Europe, CLIL, that is Content and Language Integrated Learning.

Content and Language Integration (CLI) as a theoretical achievement based on CBI and CLIL, is localized in China, and proposed by a group of experts including Chang Junyue, former Dean of the School of English at Dalian University of Foreign Studies, together with other pertinent experts. “CLI is an educational philosophy or approach in which a target language is expected to be used as much as possible and as appropriate as possible for the teaching and learning of both content and language in integrated ways for multiple educational purposes” (Chang & Zhao, 2020) . The core of CLI is the organic integration of content and language in education and teaching, without artificially separating the two. Traditional language learning emphasizes listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills training, with emphasis on listening, expressiveness, and memorization. CLI emphasizes not the language itself, but the learning of subject matter content, which is suitable for using language functions in content-dependent authentic contexts. There also exists a difference between CLI and CLIL. This reform of the curriculum at Dalian University of Foreign Languages does not focus on teaching in English, but also on the mother tongue as an important medium of communication between teachers and students (Chang et al., 2020, p. 14). Furthermore, this reform does not stop at instruction, but goes beyond mere language teaching to a holistic education of knowledge, competence and quality. CLI relies on the methodological flexibility of content-dependent teaching, which mobilizes students to take the initiative to learn through problem-driven and output-driven methods, and organically combines effective activities and tools such as heuristics, tasks, discussions, pair work, group activities, classroom presentations, multimedia tools, etc. with the teaching of subject content to improve students’ language skills, stimulate their interest, cultivate their independence and creativity, and enhance their intercultural competence (Chang et al., 2010).

2.2 The Textbook: British and American Culture: A Course to Develop Critical Thinking from a Cross-cultural Perspective

It’s a textbook of the “English for Intercultural Communication Course Series” launched by Foreign Studies. As an extension course of English for university students, this course requires a certain level of English foundation and is usually taken by second-year undergraduates in English. It consists of six units: Nature and Mankind, Education and Growth, Popularity and Mass, Crisis and Reflection, Separation and Integration, and Technology and Life. Like other intercultural courses, the goal of the course is to enable students to understand the politics, economy, culture, and history of British and American countries, and to further improve students’ intercultural awareness, intercultural communication skills, English thinking skills, and overall English usage skills.

However, *British and American Culture: A Course to Develop Critical Thinking From a Cross-cultural Perspective* has two distinctive features, which makes it one of the best choices as the target book for this study: first, the themes of the book are oriented to the whole mankind, which are various problems that the whole world is bound to face in the process of development and exploration, and when students

understand, study and discuss the various themes, they will certainly help them to reflect on the problems from the perspective of the community of destiny and build the society. The second feature lies in its unique teaching mode, which adopts the principle of the order of learning as defined in the ancient Chinese Confucian classic *The Golden Mean of the Confucian*, that is, “study extensively, inquire accurately, reflect carefully, discriminate clearly and practice earnestly”. This principle leads students to study widely, ask relevant questions, learn to think thoroughly, develop clear judgment, and finally use the knowledge and ideas gained to guide their practice. Similarly, the teaching model of “Ge Wu Zhi Zhi”, which means to study the phenomena of nature in order to acquire knowledge, is based on the Confucian classic *The Great Learning*. This principle requires students to inquire into the principles of things in order to gain knowledge.

Therefore, *the use of this book to conduct the cultural analysis* is a good way to bridge the gap between the traditional language teaching, culture teaching and discernment teaching, and is suitable and helpful to cultivate foreign language professionals’ logical ability, critical thinking ability, comprehensive literacy and cultural confidence.

2.3 Intercultural Competence

The specific categorization of intercultural competence also varies, but scholars have more generally accepted the goal-based categorization proposed by the American educator Bloom to build a model framework of intercultural competence along three dimensions: knowledge, attitudes, and skills. For example, Byram (1997) classifies intercultural competence into cultural awareness and insight, positive attitudes toward different cultures, and the ability to behave appropriately in cultural situations. Hamilton (1998), on the other hand, provides a more detailed division on top of the trichotomy, which includes awareness of one’s own cultural orientation and the similarities and differences between cultures, understanding the meaning of cultural oppression and the impact of cultural differences on communication (knowledge competence); valuing one’s own group and heterocultural groups, opposing cultural discrimination and ethnocentrism, and preferring to improve one’s life through intercultural communication (attitudinal competence); and having the ability to (attitudinal competence); the ability to identify cultural similarities and differences and to reflect on them, the ability to adopt multiple perspectives to understand situational differences, the ability to challenge discrimination and to communicate across cultures etc. (skill competence). Some domestic scholars have made a comprehensive overview and summary of the components of intercultural competence, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. A Comprehensive Overview and Summary of Intercultural Competence

	General Capabilities	Specific Capabilities
Cognitive Dimension	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand the definition and characteristics of culture and the influence of culture on human perceptions and behaviors. 2. Understand the current situation regarding other peoples, cultures, and social groups. 3. Understands the causes of cultural barriers and how to overcome them. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand one's own social, cultural, and historical background. 2. Understand the social, cultural, and historical backgrounds of other regions and around the world. 3. Understand how social and cultural backgrounds influence individuals. 4. Understand the physical and social needs of different cultural groups 5. Understand how other social groups deal with the above needs
Attitude Dimension	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Maintain a tolerant, respectful, and open mindset towards different cultures and lifestyles. 2. Hold a positive attitude towards learning cultural differences. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respect the various behaviors of other social and cultural patterns. 2. Actively regulate disputes arising from cultural differences. 3. Actively fight against all forms of cultural discrimination and cultural prejudice. 4. Respect the equal rights of all individuals and groups.
Skill Dimension	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Able to interpret, relate, evaluate, learn, and adapt to culture. 2. Able to engage in cross-cultural communication and contact with others. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify, analyze, and criticize various behaviors of different cultural patterns 2. Make contributions to harmonious coexistence among different social and cultural backgrounds in modern society 3. Face up to narrow xenophobia and oppose discrimination and racism 4. Conduct constructive dialogue and cooperation to calmly resolve disputes

(Huang & Wei, 2007; Jiang, 2013)

2.4 Five Basic Principles of Intercultural Teaching: CREED

Professor Sun Youzhong of Beijing Foreign Studies University (2016) proposes 5 basic principles of intercultural teaching, namely Critiquing, Reflecting, Exploring, Empathizing and Doing, the initial

letters of these 5 concepts exactly form the English word CREED, which we may understand as The 5 tenets of intercultural teaching and learning.

Principle 1: Critiquing. Intercultural teaching should train students to use cognitive skills to solve intercultural problems. Critiquing is a professionally trained thinking process in which people actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing and/or evaluating information or communication as a guide to belief and action (Scriven & Paul, 1987).

Principle 2: Reflecting. Reflection helps students to better understand their strengths and weaknesses, identify and question their underlying values and beliefs, challenge the assumptions behind their perceptions, feelings and behaviors, find hidden biases, acknowledge their fears and identify weaknesses and areas for improvement (Rogerson, Monash University, 2016).

Principle 3: Exploring. Intercultural teaching should focus on the process of exploring intercultural issues, so that learning activities are drawn by questions and become a search for new knowledge and new understanding, in which teachers are facilitators of learning activities and students actively and autonomously explore and take increasing responsibility for learning activities and competence development (Spronken Smith, 2016).

Principle 4: Empathizing. In the context of intercultural communication, the American scholar Calloway Thomas (2015) defines empathy as “the ability to enter and participate in the world of the cultural other through imagination at the cognitive, emotional and behavioral levels”.

Principle 5: Doing. Learning by doing, also known as experiential learning, has become a widely accepted and effective teaching philosophy in all disciplines of education. Kolb’s experiential learning cycle is perhaps the most scholarly influential and cited model regarding experiential learning theory. (Morris, 2020). According to the theoretical model proposed by Kolb (1984), experiential learning is a linearly related four-stage cyclical process that includes four steps: concrete experience abilities (CE), reflective observation abilities (RO), abstract conceptualization abilities (AC), and active experimentation (AE) abilities.

In accordance with these principles, intercultural teaching and learning should not be dominated by knowledge instillation and lecturing, but rather by active thinking, which means that students should first master the methods of thinking and carefully design diverse cross-cultural tasks that require them to use thinking to complete.

3. The Design of Autonomous Study Worksheets in the Course *British and American Culture: A Course to Develop Critical Thinking*

CLI advocates giving full play to the role of the teacher as well as the role of the student (Chang, 2020). Contemporary Language Learning theories emphasize the decisive role of learners in the learning process and learner autonomy. A large number of researches show that the most important

factor in language teaching is the learner rather than the teacher, and the teaching should be student-centered, with the student as the main body of teaching (Gao, & Zhang,). Therefore, English teaching should be a skill-constructing course to cultivate students' learning ability instead of a knowledge-learning course to instill knowledge into students.

Autonomous study worksheet is one of the effective ways to enhance students' independent learning ability and highlight students' main position in teaching. After incorporating the definitions of autonomous study worksheets from several scholars, "Autonomous study worksheet is a form that teachers develop for students in the smart classroom environment to guide their independent learning based on a combination of curriculum standards, materials and students' realities, and matched with independent learning resources" (Gao et al., 2020).

Guided by the CLI concept, this paper combines the five principles of intercultural teaching proposed by Sun Youzhong with the autonomous study worksheets to enhance students' critical thinking and intercultural communication skills. The autonomous study worksheets should serve the whole teaching process, which include a preview worksheet before class, a learning worksheet during class and a task worksheet after class. The details are shown in the following chart:

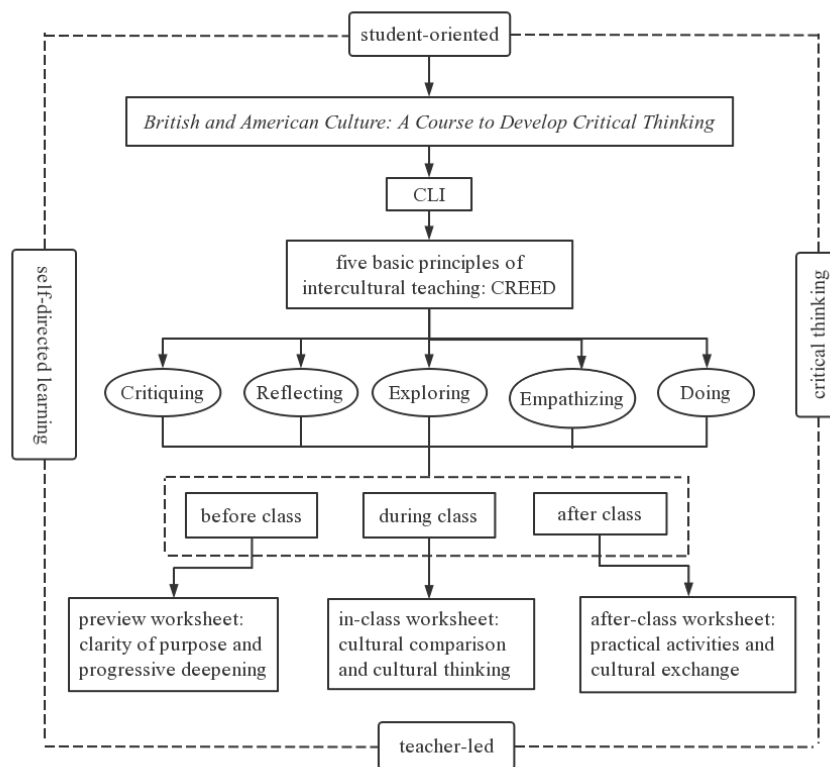


Figure 1. The Autonomous Study Worksheet

3.1 Preview Worksheet: Clarity of Purpose and Gradual Deepening

Advance organizer is a concept introduced by Ausubel in the early 1960s. According to Ausubel's classic explanation, an organizer is a guide with a high level of abstraction and generalization that is presented before the learning material is presented. The organizer is the connection between new knowledge and old knowledge, providing a "conceptual anchor point" for learning new ideas and enabling the smooth integration of new knowledge into existing cognitive structures. A typical advance organizer can be a guiding case, a preview sheet, etc. In this article, a preview worksheet is used to allow students to do independent learning before class with the help of an advance organizer.

The role of the preview worksheet: (1) introduce the theme of the unit, inspire students to think and understand the connotation of the theme; (2) mobilize students' visual perception and stimulate interest in learning and exploration (3) demonstrate the learning objectives and activity tasks to understand the whole picture of the unit (4) encourage students to participate in discussions around the topic with their own background knowledge, experiences and experiences (Brinkerhoffetal., 1983).

Structure of the preview worksheet: (1) Theme. At the top of the worksheet, write down the theme of the unit with corresponding pictures, so as to fully engage students' senses and prepare them for following study. (2) Teaching objectives. The first step in learning a subject, a unit or an article is to clarify the learning goals, which is the most important. When the *College English Teaching Guide* (Version 2020) mentions the dual nature of college English courses as instrumentality and humanity, it emphasizes that its instrumental nature is mainly expressed in listening, speaking, reading, writing, translating and English for special purposes, while its humanistic nature is mainly reflected in familiarizing with foreign societies and cultures, enhancing awareness and understanding of the differences and similarities of different cultures, and developing intercultural communication skills. Therefore, the teaching objectives of the preview worksheets can be refined into the structure shown below:

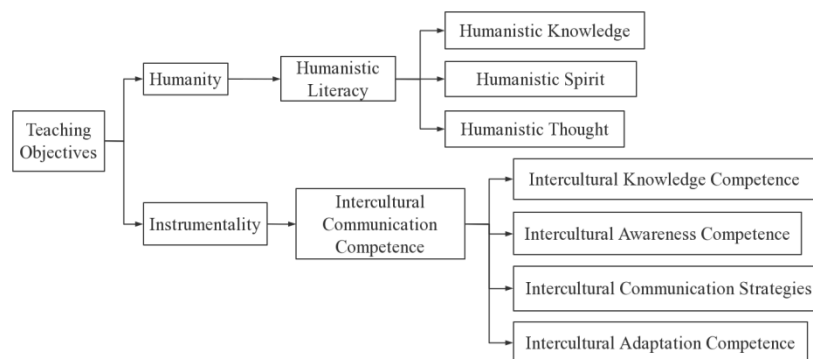


Figure 2. The Teaching Objectives of the Preview Worksheets

(3) Tasks. Based on the theme of the opening page, the preview tasks are designed according to Sun Youzhong's five basic principles of intercultural teaching (2016), so that students can complete the preview tasks on their own under the guidance of the worksheet and enter the classroom with their personalized ideas or achievements, and further communicate with their classmates and teachers to strengthen their correct understanding or correct their wrong ideas. For example, in the knowledge input session, the teacher can break down the information covered in the chapter into several knowledge points before class, and have students first study on their own before class with video materials and MOOC to grasp the main points of the topic. The teacher divides the class into cooperative learning groups, and lets the group work together to review the information, sort out the knowledge points, form a written report, and then share the explanation with the class in the class discussion session.

(4) Autonomous study feedback.

This part is about students' reflection and review of the learning process after learning, which can further deepen their understanding and thinking about their new knowledge and summarize their learning process, and finally they can enter the class with their "doubts" and "gains". Many educators praise feedback for promoting students' autonomous learning and influencing their outcomes in the process of professionally oriented English communication (Dmitrenko & Budas, 2021).

For example, the structure of the preview worksheet for Lesson 1 "Fog and Haze" in Unit 1 "Humans and Nature" can be designed as follows as an example:

Preview Worksheet	
I . Theme: Human and Nature	
II . Teaching Objectives	
1. Humanistic literacy	<p>(1) Humanistic knowledge: able to compare and contrast London's urban environment and air quality in the 19th century with that of today. Experience the London scene in the author Dickens' time.</p> <p>(2) Humanistic spirit: able to advocate the scientific relationship between man and nature, and respect the laws of nature.</p> <p>(3) Humanistic thought: able to understand that humans should deal with the relationship between man and nature and not destroy the environment uncontrollably for the sake of man's own development, and make rules accordingly.</p>

2. Intercultural communication competence	<p>(1) Intercultural knowledge competence: able to compare the attitudes of Chinese and Western cultures towards fog and find out the similarities. Consider how human beings should find a balance between development and environmental protection.</p> <p>(2) Intercultural awareness competence: able to understand the cultural environment in which China and the West live and to have an understanding and tolerance of the cultural differences between them.</p> <p>(3) Intercultural communication strategies: able to seek harmony and avoid conflict when communicating with peers, teachers and foreign professors, and use language and expressions that are understandable to the others to present your views.</p>
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III. Tasks

1. *Critiquing*: read the opening page and complete the following table:

The relationship between man and nature		
Religious and Psychological Perspectives	Ancient Greek culture	<u>Nature exists to serve the interests of man.</u>
	Christian Thought	<u>Placing human beings above all natural things.</u>
Romantic and Philosophical Perspectives	Romantics	<u>Enjoying the natural beauty and the tacit relationship between man and nature.</u>
	Transcendentalists	<u>It is believed that by stepping into the true beauty represented by all things natural, each person has the potential to perfect his or her divinity.</u>
Ecological Ethics	<u>Human beings must respect not only the other members of the living union, but also the living union itself.</u>	

2. *Reflecting*: In your opinion, what are the decisive factors that undermine the harmonious relationship between man and nature?

3. *Exploring*: What is the natural environment like in London today? What methods have the British government tried to use to manage the environment throughout history?

4. *Emphasizing*: Go to the internet and collect pictures of urban haze in China and compare them with pictures of London haze in Dickens' time. Analyse whether there are similarities between mid-19th century Britain and China. When was the last time you experienced the haze and describe your experience at that time.

5. *Doing*: Find information to summarize what are the dangers of haze? And what causes an imbalance in the harmonious relationship between man and nature? What do you think such relationship should be like? Explain your views through presentation. (You are advised go online to find resources related to environmental change or protection, such as pictures, articles, videos, etc. to testify your point of view).

IV. Autonomous Study Feedback

My gains	
My doubts	

3.2 In-class Worksheet: Cultural Comparisons and Critical Thinking

Students' independent learning skills are developed and enhanced through the implementation of a series of activities, which mainly using task-based teaching methods. The focus of the course *British and American Culture: A Course to Develop Critical Thinking* is on the comparison and discernment of Chinese and Western cultures. The concept of task is quite vague. Tasks can be real-world focused or instructional (Nunan, 2012); they can be listing, ordering and sorting, matching, comparing, problem solving, as well as doing projects and sharing personal experiences (Willis, 2007); they can be closed, semi-closed/open and open (Willis, 1996) and they can be input-providing and output-prompting (Ellis, 2009). In this study, the author used the outline of procedure for task-based learning proposed by Willis in 1996.

Pre-task		
Exposure	Introduction to topic and task	Instruction
Task Cycle		
Exposure	Task	Use (spontaneous)

Exposure	Planning	Instruction (as needed)
Exposure(planned)	Report	Use (planned)
Exposure	Student hear task recording or read a text	
Language Focus		
Exposure	Analysis and practice	Instruction/ Use (restricted)
Exposure	Review and repeat task	Use (spontaneous)

For example, in lesson 17 (Literature and Consumption), the in-class learning worksheet is supposed to be designed as follows:

In-class Learning Worksheet
Lesson 17 Literature and Consumption

I . Tasks

Pre-task

Discussion: “Pop Art” and “Mass Media”

Learn about the origins and development of “Pop Art” and “Mass Media”. Then discuss the topics of most popular movies, pop songs, and reality shows in recent years and reflect how these pop cultures have influenced our lives.

II.	Task Cycle
	<p><u>I . Critiquing and Reflecting:</u> Experience the different feelings brought by the original and the movie.</p> <p>i . Read an excerpt from the original Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone.</p> <p>ii . Watch a movie clip corresponding to the original excerpt.</p> <p><u>II . Exploring:</u> After reading the text <i>Is There a Text in This Advertising Campaign?: Literature, Marketing and Harry Potter</i>, discuss in groups of five:</p> <p>i . How do you understand Harry Potter as both a marketing and a literary phenomenon?</p> <p>ii . J. K. Rowling wants to separate Harry Potter from marketing, was she able to make that happen?</p>
	Language focus
	<p><u>III . Emphasizing:</u> Read a Chinese article: literature cannot be an “industrial product”, and compare the two articles:</p> <p>i . What are the same points and different points in the Chinese and English articles?</p> <p>ii . What “star writers” and literary figures do you know? Which of their works have you read? How do you feel about them?</p> <p>iii . Discuss with group members: how to improve the reading interest and aesthetic level of the public?</p> <p><u>VI . Doing:</u> as seen in after-class worksheet.</p>
Autonomous Study Feedback	
My gains	
My doubts	

3.3 After-class Worksheet: Practical Activities and Cultural Exchange

Empathy lab activity is thoughtfully designed and sequenced to promote student engagement with difference and employ reflection to deepen student learning and to connect the exercise to the curriculum (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012).

Doing : Empathy Lab

Topic: Performing, experiencing, commenting, communicating

Form: performing excerpts of classic Chinese and foreign literature

Participants: Chinese sophomore English major students; international exchange students

Activity requirements:

i . Chinese students and international exchange students are divided into groups of 4-6 within their respective groups.

ii . For Chinese students: each group selects any excerpt from a foreign classic and performs it; for foreign students: each group selects an excerpt from any Chinese classic and performs it.

iii. Finally, three outstanding works will be selected in the conference room of the International Exchange Building, and certificates will be issued and uploaded to the school's official website. The international exchange students will score and select the works of the Chinese students; the Chinese students will score and select the works of the international exchange students. The top three with the highest scores are considered outstanding works.

When students watch the results, they are able to perceive the performance work with their personal, national cultural experience, and in the process achieve cultural empathy. At the same time, the students may encounter cultural clashes and exchanges between China and foreign countries in the process of selecting excellent works, which helps to cultivate students' cross-cultural personality.

4. Conclusion

In the context of global cultural integration and collision of values, the basic British and American culture courses have less class time, but they are responsible for cultivating students' cultural thinking and discernment skills as well as improving students' overall quality and cultivating moral character. Therefore, it is particularly important to actively explore the autonomous study teaching mode of British and American culture discernment courses, and to combine ideological and political thinking with critiquing ability. In the future, the world cultural competition will be more intense, and the cultivation of talents is the core of the competition. We should insist on cultivating a young generation with international vision, cultural discernment and cultural confidence.

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Note(s)

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