



# Research on College English Education From the Perspective of Culturally Responsive Teaching

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**Supported by** the Research and Planning Fund for Education and Sciences Program of Education Department in Hubei Province (2017ZA011).

Received 8 December 2018; accepted 10 January 2019  
 Published online 26 February 2019

## Abstract

Culture and language are inseparable. Language is the carrier of culture, and culture is merged with language. At present, college English education has mostly neglected the cultural elements in terms of setting teaching goal, content and method. This paper mainly explores the effective education of college English from the perspective of culturally responsive teaching. It focuses on cultural responses by deeply digging into cultural connotations, paying attention to the output of native culture, and innovating teaching methods, which enables English teaching to have semantic and pragmatics education value, as well as the value of cultural education.

**Key words:** Culturally responsive teaching; College English; Teaching strategy

Bao, M. J. (2019). Research on College English Education From the Perspective of Culturally Responsive Teaching. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 18(1), 1-5. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/10929>  
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/10929>

## INTRODUCTION

As China and the world become more and more closely connected, it has been widely recognized to further strengthen college English education. People gradually have higher expectation for college English education than earlier days, and educators have also made great

efforts to meet the expectation. However, for many years, college English education often emphasizes language and underrates culture, which reduces the intrinsic value of foreign language education. Therefore, educators have gradually initiated and focused on culturally responsive education in teaching contemporary college English courses, which is undoubtedly beneficial to alter and innovate current college English education.

## 1. THE CONNOTATION AND FEATURES OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

### 1.1 The Connotation of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching originated in the United States in the 1970s, and then expanded into the field of multiculturalism, which is now quite mature and has been applied in various areas. With the increasing international exchanges and the rapid development of the world economy, China's education sector has begun to pay attention to the reference of cultural responsive teaching to English teaching. At present, different scholars think differently about culturally responsive teaching, and their definitions are different. The most widely accepted understanding is that culturally responsive teaching is a teaching model based on the learner's original culture and is further integrated with other factors. In the process of teaching, teachers need to deeply explore the different characteristics and needs of students from various cultural backgrounds, and develop the potential of students to the greatest extent by leveraging students' native culture. At the same time, as culturally responsive teaching alters cultural differences between students, such as race, ethnicity, class background, region, religion, and family, students in general have also shown consent about this. At

present, college English education mostly has neglected the cultural elements in terms of setting teaching goal, content and method which hinder the students' ability to learn and explore. It is noted that culturally responsive teaching advocates that students' native culture is used as a bridge of learning instead of a barrier to learning (Zeichner, 1995). School education should appropriately pay attention to the influence of students' native culture, and connect with their new knowledge represented by symbols.

Culturally responsive teaching, as an educational concept and teaching strategy, is different from traditional teaching model in many aspects, while traditional teaching model has dominated educational field in China for a long time. The introduction of culturally responsive teaching helps to promote the realization of democratic education and fair education, and raise cultural inheritance and integration.

## **1.2 The Features of Culturally Responsive Teaching**

In traditional teaching model, classroom is considered as a closed and isolated system. Students mainly learn in the classroom with less extracurricular cultural experience. Culturally responsive teaching is an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural teaching model that encourages learners to invest quickly in the learning process. For multi-ethnic students, this model helps them explore their potential and ease differences by analyzing their learning styles and psychosocial abilities, such as different races, class backgrounds, regions, religions, and family cultures. This ensures each student to obtain cultural identity. Besides, it emphasizes students' existing cultural background and learning experience. In this model, the learning process is not just simply following the syllabus and course materials but also jointly accomplished by teachers and students. Compared with traditional teaching, culturally responsive teaching has the following features:

### **1.2.1 Emphasize the Importance of Students' Native Culture**

From the perspective of culturally responsive teaching, it recognizes that the group culture of students will have a certain impact on students, including students' emotions, attitudes, value and learning styles, and emphasizes that the individual uniqueness influenced will be by the culture. This is also the resource that is beneficial to be applied into the teaching process. In culturally responsive teaching, cultural background and values of student families and communities play an indispensable role. At the same time, the role of the teacher has changed, from the learning instructor to the learning facilitator. In the classroom, teachers will modify the course according to the students' personal interests and learning life experiences. The teaching model has shifted from teacher-

centered to student-centered (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In this case, students' life, interest and cultural background constitute the basis of the curriculum, so that students can actively participate in the whole curriculum planning. Under this teaching model emphasizing students' native culture, students' learning enthusiasm will be greatly improved. They will feel that their personal experiences and cultures are valued by teachers, which will significantly improve students' ability to understand new knowledge. This will help students feel the transformation from passive recipients to active participants in the learning process.

### **1.2.2 Focus on Students' Demand**

Teachers should not only fully respect individual differences of students from different cultures and life experiences but also timely adjust teaching contents, strategies and methods with respect to students' needs. Depending on students' specific needs, it is important to choose the most appropriate teaching method to ensure fair treatment and benefits for students' learning and growth. In culturally responsive teaching model, teachers should first reflect on their own thoughts because their personal value and view of the world will affect their relationship with students and students' families. Secondly, teachers need to learn to explore their personal experiences, summarize related activities and connect those personal experiences with course materials. Given that, teachers can choose teaching materials, alter them, or even add new materials according to their cultural background and relevant growth experiences to enhance the integration of academic knowledge and individual experiences and improve students' ability to learn.

### **1.2.3 Advocate the Cooperation Among Families, Universities, and Communities**

Culturally responsive teaching advocates that families, universities and communities are closely linked together and impacts on students' learning. It is believed that learning process should be actively engaged with the involvement of family and community (Goodman & Hooks, 2016). Introducing familiar objectives into the class and teaching process would help enhance students' sense of identity, enable students to accept and understand new knowledge. In culturally responsive teaching, the community and the family are also the composition of the student's personal experience. These two will influence the choice of the students and affect their feelings about the personal experience. From another perspective, students' individualization is shown from the aspects of family, university and community. Therefore, in culturally responsive teaching model, teachers should emphasize those three factors, find the connection among them, and apply it to the teaching process.

## 2. CURRENT STATUS OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSES

Today's college students come from all over the country and the world. Some of them come from dominate culture, some may come from ethnic minorities, and their personal experiences vary to some extent. In traditional teaching, teachers have paid more attention to course preparation rather than incorporating students' life experience. They argue that good preparation could help students understand the knowledge well which fulfills teachers' duties and obtains high scores during the exam to highlight their achievements. This phenomenon is also very common in college English education. Most teachers believe that their main responsibility is to improve students' English scores, impart knowledge and help students pass college English tests (CET-4 and CET-6). However, in reality, teachers have not sufficiently understood students' personal experiences and cannot design courses material based on their needs. Therefore, the textbook knowledge is boring and attending classes is simply for the sake of passing exam, and students cannot really understand and feel the happiness in English study.

Though college English course education has been implemented and achieved great results in China for many years, there are still some problems in terms of effectiveness. While affirming the achievements of college English education reform, scholars also point out that current "University English Course Teaching Requirements" is not sufficiently enough for the growth of different level students, which leads to the unsatisfactory quality of college English education. In response to the newly issued "College English Education Guide", the combination of compulsory courses and elective courses (i.e. comprehensive English, language skills, applied language, language and culture, and professional English) is set to ensure that students at different levels can greatly improve their English application abilities. Generally speaking, college English teachers are mechanical, passive, and repeating the course followed the requirements of the curriculum, without special emphasis on cultural knowledge, learning consciousness, planning and systematisms of cultural knowledge learning. All of those create resistance to the implementation of the curriculum and affect the quality of college English education. Generally speaking, teachers would more focus on considering students from different starting points, taking care of students from lower starting points, expanding development space based on better foundation, helping students to lay a language foundation, and cultivating their practical application abilities such as listening and speaking. However, it is difficult to realize this idea under the present teaching model.

When teaching college English, teachers should explore outside of the classroom and university, and walk into students' life to get familiar with their living environments and understand their needs. Given that, teachers are able to adjust teaching methods and contents in a targeted manner. It is better to integrate students' personal experiences and cultures into the class, and make students feel a sense of belonging, which will greatly improve their mentality and intelligence (Gay, 2000). For example, if some students like music, teachers could collect some information about English and American music culture. Courses can be designed to introduce music culture to students and encourage them in the process of introduction. In this way, students may become interested in this language, and they may explore British and American culture on their own in the process of learning.

In general, current status of college English education in China is mainly reflected in the teaching goal, content and method. Teaching goal emphasizes language and pays little attention to culture; teaching content emphasizes the input of English culture instead of the output of native culture; and teaching method emphasizes conventional procedures and pays little attention to communication. The following section talks about the strategies that have been proposed in culturally responsive teaching in college English education.

## 3. STRATEGIES FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN COLLEGE ENGLISH EDUCATION

English is not only a tool for language communication, but also a part of culture. Depending on culturally responsive teaching, college English education should pay attention to the combination of cultural response, language education and cultural education, that is, should include the value of language education in the field of semantics and pragmatics as well as the value of cultural education during teaching process. Therefore, in the field of college English education, the strategy of cultural response should highlight the following aspects:

### 3.1 Explore Cultural Connotation to Highlight Cultural Value of English Teaching

College English teachers should analyze cultural connotation contained in the language, clarify the values, living habits and regulations of interpersonal communication behind the culture, and guide students to correctly identify foreign cultures. Words, sentences, moods, semantics and implicit concepts in English often have specific cultural connotations (Hollie, 2017). With the help of exploring cultural connotation, college English teachers can not only cultivate students' skills to communicate interculturally, but also help students

to choose and establish a sense of values that meets the needs of society and individuals.

Language is the carrier of culture, and the language without culture only refers to a bunch of empty symbols. The selection of textbooks for college English study is very abroad and involves a wide range of topics including national living habits, political strategies, religious beliefs, artistic attainments of east and west culture, etc. If students know little knowledge about these backgrounds, it will be difficult for them to have a thorough understanding of the language and use it incorrectly. Students often catch the meaning of words literally when learning English. For example, “a black sheep” refers to “a bad egg of the community”, while students often literally understand “a black sheep”; “pull one’s leg” refers to “make a joke” and students are easily confused as “drag legs”. There is another example which is often misunderstood by students because of the lack of background culture. The phrase “the (hand) writing on the wall” in English is often mistakenly translated into “posters with big characters on the wall” in Chinese. In fact, this phrase comes from the Bible, saying that the king of Babylon had hosted a banquet for noblemen, but he made blasphemies during the feast. Then weird words were written on the palace wall by an invisible big hand which appeared suddenly. Soon after, the king of Babylon was killed. Thus, “the (hand) writing on the wall” is used to indicate “the ominous auspices.” It can be easily seen that college English teachers should focus on introducing or supplementing knowledge related to the background culture. And if necessary, teachers could compare English culture with Chinese culture so that students can not only know the meaning of words and sentences, but also understand their culture behind it. This teaching model has significant contribution to infiltrating cultural background knowledge into teaching process and leading students to learn and explore the teaching methods of Chinese and Western culture autonomously. On one hand, it can improve students’ interest in learning the language; on the other hand, it can lay a solid knowledge foundation for students’ language learning and language understanding.

### **3.2 Emphasize on First Language Output by Leveraging Chinese Culture**

Professor He Qichen points out that in the 21st century, foreign language education should not only focus on English teaching itself, but also connect with culture to help promote the cultural awareness of young people in new era to some extent (Zheng, 2008). This can help students introduce Chinese culture to the world, help students truly understand their own country and Chinese culture as well as ensure the ability to convey their native culture confidently, accurately and authentically to the world. In English, most students have “aphasia”, especially when it comes to Chinese culture, therefore, it

is imperative to incorporate Chinese culture into English teaching and achieve positive cultural migration.

In college English education, textbooks determine the content of teaching and the effectiveness of teaching and learning. However, after reading the college English course textbook “New Century College English” (Huang, 2017), it is not difficult to find that most of the chapters are selected from the British and American newspapers and periodicals, and the materials reflect the British and American culture. If teachers are confined to the existing textbooks in class, it will lead to the emphasis on the introduction of English language and culture and the neglect of Chinese culture. College English teachers should be aware that the basic premise of “interculturalism” is to have a deep understanding of national culture instead of abandoning their own culture to achieve cross-cultural teaching. For example, when speaking of “music”, teachers can start from the goddess Muse in English culture, and then introduce Chinese music culture. In this way, students will have a relatively thorough understanding of Chinese and Western culture behind the word. Speaking of “drive”, teachers should not just list the explanation in the dictionary, instead they should interpret it as “make it move”, which could help explain many English sentences that plague students, such as a famous line in New Century College English 2---Laughter is the sun that drives winter from the human face. When referred to the same thing, teachers even could compare Chinese expression with English expression, which is good for students to feel the beauty of the two different languages and deeply understand the cultures in class.

In the process of positive cultural migration, language is the carrier of culture. Different languages would carry different meanings depending on their own cultures. For example, the tradition of “respecting the older and loving the younger” has been deeply rooted since the ancient times in China. Students will not call teacher’s name when greeting teachers for Chinese students. For foreign students, it is common to call teacher’s name when greeting. During the process of learning language, students should not only be guided to learn the foreign language by leveraging native language habits, but also be reminded the differences between English and Chinese cultures. This enables them to understand the commonalities and differences of language, and use their own when acquiring language. They should also learn to pay more attention to the influences caused by culture in language learning.

### **3.3 Innovate New Teaching Methods by Experiential Inquiry Learning**

Experiential inquiry learning refers that teachers give certain guidance on the basis of students’ own interests. Students can experience language learning through their own efforts, actively acquire knowledge information, and apply what they have learned in life. Besides, they

could learn how to utilize the knowledge and information to solve problems, complete communicative tasks and understand the language and its culture during the communication process.

In actual communication process, the specific language form is always restricted by context factors such as time, place, topic, speaker's emotion, personality, social role and cultural background (Anil, 2017). Therefore, in order to guide students to use English properly, specific communicative contexts should be provided in advance, and appropriate training methods should be used flexibly to encourage students to engage in verbal or written, bilateral or multilateral communications. Through the activities such as role-play, situational dialogue, drama performance of the story in English and English debate competition, students' learning abilities can be greatly enhanced and this enables them to have a sense of participation in language learning.

As the saying goes, "Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I understand." The understanding of Chinese and foreign cultures, ways of thinking, and lifestyles often cannot be directly taught to students through transfer-acceptance method, instead it requires inquiry-based learning. This requires college English teachers to conduct inquiry-based learning in the class, cultivate students' sensitivity to Chinese and foreign cultures, develop their awareness of problems, and improve their abilities to analyze and solve problems.

### 3.4 Evaluate Students' Behaviour From a Cultural Perspective

During the evaluation process, teachers focus more on students' school performance and academic scores rather than about students' growth environments, cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs of the family. However, culture actually has a constant impact on the values and belief as an intangible property which helps shape a person. If students' native culture is neglected in the process of evaluating, the evaluation result is definitely biased. For example, a teacher criticizes a student indiscriminately when a student behaves differently from others because of his religious beliefs. At this time, the teacher's criticism could intensify the student's negative attitudes towards study. Therefore, teachers need to evaluate students' performance from a cultural perspective to a certain extent. They can understand students through taking cultural factors into account in the process of evaluating students. Culturally responsive teaching can enhance students' knowledge understanding and self-

confidence through the correct and objective evaluation of students, and achieve emotional integration.

## CONCLUSION

Students are the object of education. With the development of society, multicultural education has received more attention as the expanding of student groups in multicultural ways. In this case, teachers need to pay more attention to the differences among students from various cultural backgrounds and contribute to develop professional vocational skills effectively. In addition, teachers also need to learn to analyze and understand cultural backgrounds of students to stimulate their interests in learning language. Due to the diversity of students, teachers should scientifically and reasonably evaluate students' learning and performance rather than applying single teaching model and method in general. Culturally responsive teaching model allows students from different cultural backgrounds to learn how to create a harmonious learning and living environment on a colorful campus.

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