



## On Cultivating Senior Middle School Students' Cross-Cultural Awareness in English Classes

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### Abstract

Language is not only an important means for people to communicate, but also an important carrier of cultural heritage. But at the present stage of high school English teaching in China, teachers merely put the emphasis on the basic knowledge of English, such as the vocabulary, grammar and so on, while ignoring cultivating cross-cultural awareness. By empirical methods and the analysis of the survey results, the present study analyzes the reasons and points out some ways to cope with the problem.

**Key words:** Culture; Cross-cultural awareness; High school English teaching

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### INTRODUCTION

Under the circumstances of economic globalization and China's reform and opening up, China exchanges with other countries more frequently, including economic and trade cooperation and cultural exchange. English as the world's most widely used language, its instrumental role in communication is becoming more important than before. In China, people, from primary to university or even at work, keep on learning English. So today, more and more English scholars and English teachers

are concerned about English teaching in China. In the process of learning English, students and teachers have a misunderstanding that English learning is only a tool to deal with examinations. High school English teaching is simply in response to the college entrance examination and the lack of teaching of cultural awareness only does harm, instead of benefits, to English learning. The high school is an important stage of training personnel, therefore how to properly instill cross-cultural awareness to students to communicate in a flexible, accurate way to express their own thoughts in English should be the fundamental standpoint of English teaching.

Cross-cultural communication (or intercultural communication) refers to the communication between native and non-native speakers, and also refers to any communication between people whose language and cultural background differ from each other. So it is the communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. With the rapid development of transport and communication means, people of all nationalities from different countries are able to communicate frequently, thus producing a new developing discipline, cross-cultural communication. Language survives on culture. To study culture from the perspective of language education has become a consensus. Cross-cultural communication requires two abilities, language capability and cultural understanding competences. It is because there are more and more communication failures due to cultural conflicts that people think it is particularly important to improve cross-cultural understanding capabilities in foreign language learning.

This paper investigates and analyzes current status of cross-cultural awareness in English teaching and focuses on high school teachers and students' attitude towards cross-cultural awareness cultivation. It expounds on the urgency and importance of cultivating senior middle school student's cross-cultural awareness in English classes. Through discussing definition of cross-cultural communication and the need to improve cross-cultural communication, it puts forward further ways to improve

cross-cultural communication. We hope this will help senior middle school students' cross-cultural awareness training, thereby enhancing their abilities to learn foreign languages well.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The so-called consciousness is the total reflection of the objective material world in one's brain nervous system. It is the sum of feeling, thinking and other mental processes (Modern Chinese Dictionary, 1981, p.1353). Culture is a product of human consciousness. People have differences in the cognitive model of the outside world, so there must be differences in people's thinking activities (thinking consciousness), and thus people from different societies inevitably produce distinct cultures through their thinking consciousness. Robert G. Harvey put forward the concept of cross-cultural awareness in 1976, specifically referring to that human endow the respective basic abilities to create their unique culture and understand and recognize people's different attitudes and behaviours in different societies. It means the sensitivity to the similarities and differences of national culture and foreign cultures, as well as the consciousness to adjust their own language comprehension and language output according to the target language (English) culture when using a foreign language. It needs "ongoing consultation of the significance and interaction of ideas" (Bi, 1998, p.10). This not only refers to the sensitivity to different cultures, but also a positive awareness towards the mutual integration of the target language culture and native culture.

Samovar, Porter and Jain also suggested that we must truly get to know the world view, activity orientation, national essence, self-awareness and social composition of a culture so that we can properly understand the culture. The test factors Dodd announced in 1995 is more complicated, he believes "cultural roots, cultural attribute, material culture, economic structure, kinship, political system, social control, art, language, stability and religious systems are all the factors we should grasp in understanding cultures". All of these prove that the development of cross-cultural awareness is a process of getting to know a culture, from cognitive to emotional penetration and transition. In this sense, besides learning and understanding different cultures, the connotation of cultural awareness should also include the concept of cultural equality, cultural understanding and integration. In fact, cross-cultural communication itself is a process of spreading culture and integrating different cultures. While learning from each other's culture, communicators also spread their native cultures to the other and both sides make contributions to cultural fusion through mutual understanding and respect.

Cross-cultural awareness in English education involves the complex dialectical approach between teachers and students' experience and native English speakers'

experience, and it should also involve learning and understanding the target language culture and a positive awareness towards the mutual integration of the target language culture and native culture. Therefore, the cross-cultural awareness in secondary school English teaching should include four aspects: a) understand and acquire the knowledge of geography, history, literature, music, art and education of English-speaking countries; b) understand the facts contained in the behavior culture of native culture and the target language culture, and the beliefs, values they convey; c) inherit and carry forward the excellent essence of native culture and absorb the good parts from other cultures, and promote a healthy development and mutual integration of different cultures; d) improve the qualification of ourselves, promote a healthy development of personality and establish the correct values, outlook on life through the integration of native culture and western culture. (Xue, 2002, p.10).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Objective

This survey is designed to know the status of senior middle school students' cross-cultural awareness training under the guidance of the new curriculum standards and the level of their use of English in cross-cultural communication and it also focuses on high school teachers and students' attitude towards cross-cultural awareness teaching.

This paper uses methods of questionnaire and interview to test the level of senior middle school students' cross-cultural communication and analyzes relevant data to find the main factors that affect senior middle school students' cross-cultural awareness cultivation. According to the factors, it puts forward some recommendations.

### 2.2 Subjects

The subjects of the survey are English teachers and students from the second grade of Daqing No.4 Senior Middle School. 90 students from two classes did the questionnaire, male 44 and female 46. The questionnaire was distributed in the morning of February 21, 2012. The survey interviewed 3 teachers.

**Table 1**  
Students of the Survey

Subjects (students)	Male	Female	Years for studying English
Class 1	21	22	Over 7 years
Class 2	23	24	Over 7 years

**Table 2**  
Teachers of the Survey

Subjects (teachers)	Male	Female	Years for teaching English
Teacher 1			Just 1 year
Teacher 2			Over 4 years
Teacher 3			Over 10 years

## 2.3 Instruments

### 2.3.1 Interview

In order to make this study more convincing, three English teachers from second grade were interviewed as the supplementary material of this survey. The teaching experience of three teachers ranges from one year to ten years. The main purpose of the interview is to provide supplementary materials for the questionnaire. The outline of the interview is designed according to part of Report of Questionnaire on Continued Education of Middle School English Teachers by Zheng (2004) and An Empirical Research on Teachers' Perceptions of ICC Competence in FLT by Wang (2005)(see Appendix II).

### 2.3.2 Questionnaire

In the survey of investigating the status of senior middle school students' cross-cultural awareness training, it mainly focuses on the aspect of cross-cultural communication which influences how smoothly communication conducts. It selects Intercultural Communication Questionnaire (see Appendix I) jointly developed by the School and Foreign Languages of NENU and foreign expert Joan Fleming, which contain 15 questions. 83 senior middle school students from two classes of the second grade (each class 45) were tested. 15 questions are multiple choice questions and the correct answer to each question ranging from A to D.

## 3. DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

### 3.1 Data Collection

The survey interviewed 3 teachers. They were interviewed separately for about 20 minutes each. The outline of the interview is in China in order to make the teachers understand better.

The number of students to do the questionnaire is 90. The questionnaire was distributed in the morning of February 21, 2012. The copies are 90, 84 recycled, one of which is invalid, so the recovery is 92.2%. The method of calculation is as follows: the total number of students tested is 83 and if a question has two correct answers, then the total number is  $t = 2 \times 83$ , and the correct rate is  $R =$

**Table 3**  
Basic Information of the Questionnaire

Total	Recycled	Invalid	Recovery
90	84	1	92.2%

$X/166$ , then converted into percentage. The test results are shown Table 3.

### 3.2 Analysis of interview results

Through the interviews of the three English teachers, the survey indicates that two of three teachers were very or moderately concerned about knowledge of cross-cultural communication in the process of English teaching. two of

them had a better understanding of the requirements of the new curriculum standards for students on cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence, which is carried out by the Ministry of Education.

But when asked how much knowledge of cross-cultural communication they have, one of the teachers admitted that she knew only a little. Because high school teachers are busy with their teaching, so they don't have much time to have further professional training on cross-cultural knowledge teaching. two of them thought that cross-cultural communicative competence was basically used in English learning. However, when it came to English teaching model, all of the three teachers used traditional English teaching model, including traditional language knowledge and language skills training. When coming across cross-cultural knowledge to mention, they just show some pictures or phrases on PPT, in order to save time to explain grammar in preparation for usual examinations and the college entrance examination. two of teachers believed that cultivating students' cross-cultural communicative competence is to introduce the background knowledge of Western culture and the differences between Chinese culture and Western culture.

The three teachers know the main reason that produces barriers in cross-cultural communication, and also understand what cross-cultural awareness teaching should focus, but in the practice of English teaching, they do not value the differences in the way of thinking in Chinese culture and in Western culture.

### 3.3 Analysis of Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire 15 questions in Table 4 can be roughly divided into three categories: simple, medium difficulty and difficult. Question 3 and 7 belong to the simple category, correct rate is comparatively higher. The correct rate of question 3 is 54.22% and that of question 7 is 86.75%. The content of the two questions is about the concept of time. In this respect Chinese culture and Western culture are substantially the same or similar, so students feel easy to give answers. It implies that if differences between Chinese culture and Western culture are insignificant, it will be less difficult for learners to acquire foreign language on this part.

The question of medium difficulty can be divided into two parts. One is when a approach that can be accepted by both Chinese culture and Western culture, but from the point of view of westerners, this approach is not the best choice, such as question 6, what type of gift you will take if you go to a party held at your English friend's house. The correct rate is 30.12%. In our culture, we tend to decide the amount of money spent on gifts according to how close we and our friends are. While in Western culture, they often do not consider the matter of money. They just send a bouquet of flowers or a box of chocolates instead of a very precious gift.

**Table 4**  
**Analysis of Questionnaire Results**

Item	A		B		C		D		Correct rate
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	
1			22	8.84%	13	5.22%	46	18.47%	32.53%
2	25	7.53%	14	4.22%	43	12.95%	32	9.64%	34.34%
3	45	54.22%							54.22%
4	58	34.94%			7	4.22%			39.16%
5	17	20.48%							20.48%
6	18	10.84%	32	19.28%					30.12%
7			72	86.75%					86.75%
8	13	7.83%	50	30.12%					37.95%
9	29	17.47%	35	21.08%					38.55%
10	38	45.78%							45.78%
11	7	4.22%	54	32.53%					36.75%
12			26	31.33%					31.33%
13	4	4.82%							4.82%
14	28	11.24%			16	6.43%	15	6.02%	23.69%
15					43	25.90%	38	22.89%	48.79%

Another situation is that some cultural differences between Chinese culture and Western culture have been already known by people, but they do not understand comprehensively, simply knowing some aspects, or even having doubts about the answer they have got. In the traditional model of language teaching, students have already known some knowledge about Western culture, and on many occasions they try to pay attention to and adapt to some traditions and customs of Western culture. But some students do not have a deep understanding of Western culture and the integration of Chinese culture and Western culture. They regard some habits in western society inflexible, static and fixed, just like invariably applying mathematical formulas to deal with math problems, which lead to their understanding of Western culture staying in a superficial form. As a result, they chose the answer that was not the best one in the view of Westerners.

Some students were hesitant and had no clear understanding of cross-cultural knowledge so they made choice without thinking carefully. Such as question 8, which correct rate is 37.95%, one of your old friends living in a city you arrived and because you are old friends, you can make an appointment before going to visit him. But if you choose to go to his house directly to give him a surprise, it is also not a bad idea and it is often the case in the west. However, only 13 of 83 students chose A (7.83%) “go to her house and give her a surprise”, while 33 chose C “phone and fix a meeting for another day”, which is a wrong answer. In fact, because you are old friends, prior appointment is not absolutely necessary. Another example is question 4, when others commend you, you should say thank you. Affected by this, 58 students chose A and only 7 chose C (4.22%). In this situation, saying thank you is not the only answer and you can have several other options.

The final category is difficult. Questions in this category reflect more cultural differences. The strategies

and etiquettes adopted in Chinese culture and in Western culture in the same social situations are quite different. Such as question 5 (correct rate =20.48%) “Who pays when you go to a restaurant with a group of English friends?”, question 13 (correct rate =4.82%) “You are working for a joint-venture, your boss is an English. Your sister is coming from your hometown to visit you and you want to meet her at the railway station. What will you do?” and question 14 (correct rate =23.69%) “How would you react when you have heard that a foreign friend’s child is ill?”, the correct rates are all less than 30%. Take question 5 as an example, in Chinese culture we will tend to choose B “One person pays” or C “You pay your own part”. We think these two choices are reasonable and acceptable. But in regard to Western culture, if friends go out and have a meal, they prefer to share the bill. This indicates that the larger cultural differences are the more difficult for students to make the right choice and the harder for students to learn English well.

## CONCLUSION

### A. Major Findings

Through analyzing the interviews and questionnaire, it shows three prominent problems in cross-cultural teaching. Firstly, from the perspective of practice, teachers lack cross-cultural knowledge and do not have enough English teaching time. Exercise on language knowledge and language skills is still in dominant position. High school teachers are busy with their teaching, so they don’t have much time to have further professional training on cross-cultural awareness teaching. One of the teachers interviewed admitted that she knew only a little about cross-cultural knowledge.

Secondly, from the perspective of teaching objectives, due to the limitations of syllabus, many schools essentially base the main teaching objective on requirements of

college entrance examination, and language ability is secondary. Two of teachers interviewed thought that cross-cultural communicative competence was basically used in English learning. However, when it came to English teaching model, all of the Three teachers used traditional English teaching model, including traditional language knowledge and language skills training. When coming across cross-cultural knowledge to mention, they just show some pictures or phrases on PPT, in order to save time to explain grammar in preparation for use examinations and the college entrance examination. In some way it goes toward the extreme. Senior middle school English teachers understand the requirements of the new curriculum for senior middle school students' standards on cross-cultural communicative competence and cross-cultural awareness, and they are also concerned about cross-cultural communication knowledge in English class, but because of the impact of the college entrance examination, high school English teaching stressed on the explanation of basic language knowledge. As long as the practices that can improve the score for the college entrance examination, they can be carried out, otherwise they can be given up. Schools pay very little attention to cross-cultural teaching and there is no suitable textbook for cross-cultural teaching or effective examination system. Therefore cross-cultural teaching is not as important as language knowledge and language skills.

Thirdly, from the perspective of students, due to the above factors, students are weak in cross-cultural awareness knowledge, leading to their poor understanding of English culture and therefore they cannot have a good grasp and flexibility in the use of the English knowledge they have learned. In the face of some problems, such as question 5 (correct rate=20.48%), question 6(correct rate=30.12%), question 12(correct rate=31.33%) and question 13(correct rate=4.82%), students are often overwhelmed and often turn to native culture to deal with Western culture, which often results in cross-cultural communication barriers and even failure.

## B. Implications

Firstly, teaching and learning are bilateral activities, so teachers' cross-cultural knowledge will have an impact on cultivating students' cross-cultural awareness. Therefore it requires high school English teachers to have appropriate training in cross-cultural communication knowledge and value the effect that cross-cultural awareness has on high school students' English learning. Only by doing so can make students improve their integrated language capability and cross-cultural communicative competences and understand and acquire English well.

Secondly, schools and teachers should pay more attention to cross-cultural teaching in senior middle school. At different English teaching stages, levels of

cross-cultural learning are different. Cross-cultural teaching should transform from the lower level of cultural knowledge into the higher level of cultural understanding and the proportion of culture teaching should be increased. At the stage of senior middle school, students have had some basic English language knowledge and cross-cultural knowledge. At the same time, they also have a certain degree of confusion brought about by cultural differences, so schools can adjust the curriculum. In addition to continuing study of the superficial cultural knowledge, teachers should strengthen the teaching of deep structure of culture to help students understand English culture through the method of analysis and comparison in terms of nation, history, way of thinking, and social values etc..

Thirdly, at this stage, students should also be encouraged to read more deeply into English literature, to grasp English way of thinking, to analyze and understand social culture reflected in the works, in order to increase deep understanding of English culture, thereby enhancing the competence of understanding, analyzing and using English.

## C. Limitations

This thesis is on cultivating senior middle school student's cross-cultural awareness in English classes to find out major factors affecting high school students' cross-cultural knowledge, and help cultivating cross-cultural awareness in high school English classes. Due to objective factors such as research tools as well as author's own subjective factors, this thesis has some limitations. First, the scope of the investigation is not extensive. It just involves a small number of teachers and students, so it cannot fully reflect panorama of English teaching in this region. Second, due to both subjective and objective factors, it lacks in depth research of cross-cultural communication teaching. Third, the analysis of data can not represent all, as a result, the survey has a certain one-sidedness.

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## APPENDIX A

**How would you react in each of the following situations? More than one answer may be correct.**

1. You meet an English for the first time, and you want to know his or her name.

What would you say?

- A. what's your name?
- B. May I know your name?
- C. My name is ...
- D. Would you mind telling me your name?

2. Which of the following requires an apology in England?

A. You point out to a shop-assistant that she has given you the wrong change.

B. Your friend arranges a picnic but at last minute you can't go.

C. You punish your son for doing something wrong but then you find out that he didn't do it.

D. You arrive 5 minutes late for work.

3. An English friend invites you to have dinner at 6 p.m. with his family. You would arrive at

- A. 5:50
- B. 6:30
- C. 6:15
- D. 5:10

4. After having dinner at your home, an English friend compliments you on your cooking. You \_\_\_\_.

- A. smile and say "thank you"
- B. say "oh, it is far from being a good dinner"
- C. say "my mother taught me how to make it"
- D. None of the above

5. You go to a restaurant with a group of English friends. Who pays?

- A. You split the bill.
- B. One Person pays.
- C. You pay your own part.
- D. None of the above.

6. You go to a dinner party at an English friend's house. What type of gift will you take?

- A. A bottle of wine.
- B. A box of chocolate.
- C. An expensive watch.
- D. Some Chinese food you cooked yourself.

7. You are invited to a party, which starts at 8 p.m. You miss the bus and won't arrive till 9 p.m. You \_\_\_\_.

- A. don't worry about it and just turn up at 9 p.m.
- B. phone to apologize and say you'll be late
- C. go home and don't want to arrive late
- D. None of the above.

8. You're in part of town where your old English friend lives. Do you \_\_\_\_?

- A. go to her house and give her a surprise
- B. phone and find out if it's convenient for her first
- C. phone and fix a meeting for another day
- D. None of the above.

9. Hu Ying is a 25-year-old Chinese student who is attending university in England. When she explained to her English friends that she never did any housework or cooking when she was at home, her friends would probably think \_\_\_\_.

- A. Hu Ying was lazy

B. Hu Ying's mother spoiled her

C. Hu Ying's mother loved her very much

D. None of the above

10. One of your English friends is in bed with the flu. So you will \_\_\_\_.

- A. telephone to find out how she/he is
- B. go and visit your friend with some fruit
- C. do nothing
- D. None of the above

11. You and your wife have an English friend, who invites you to a party on Saturday evening.

- A. You go alone.
- B. You and your wife go.
- C. You, your wife and your five-year-old daughter go.
- D. None of the above

12. An English friend invites you to come and watch a video at her house. After the video, you will \_\_\_\_.

- A. thank her and go home immediately
- B. stay and talk about the video and have a drink
- C. stay for 5 minutes and then leave
- D. None of the above

13. You are working for a joint-venture, your boss is an English. Your sister is coming from your hometown to visit you. You want to meet her at the railway station. You will \_\_\_\_.

- A. take the day off and say you're ill
- B. explain the situation to your boss and say you won't be at work
- C. explain the situation to your boss and ask for permission to be off work
- D. None of the above

14. You have heard that a foreign friend's child is ill. How would you react?

- A. You will say "I'm sorry to hear that".
- B. You will say nothing.
- C. You will say "How is she/he now?"
- D. You will say "What's the matter with her/him"

15. What will your English friend do when he accepts your gift for his birthday? He will \_\_\_\_.

- A. accept it without any words
- B. open and watch it by himself
- C. open and watch it before you and say "Thank you."
- D. open and watch it, then express thanks to you.

## APPENDIX B Interview Outline

1. Do you pay attention to cultivate intercultural awareness in English classes? Why? What do you think of your intercultural communication competence?

2. What is your major concern in English teaching?

3. Requirements concerning communication competence and cultural awareness are included in Criteria for English Courses for General Middle School made by Ministry of Education and how do you understand them?

4. Do you think intercultural communication competence can facilitate English learning? Why?

5. Which part of knowledge should be emphasized when cultivating students' intercultural communication competence?