

The Cultivation of Intercultural Communicative Competence in TEFL in Senior High Schools Based on the Unit Themes

Siyi Liu

School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, 610000, China

Abstract: This paper investigates the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) settings within senior high schools. Unit theme teaching is an instructional approach that, guided by curriculum objectives, develops and reorganizes teaching content around thematic units. ICC plays a crucial role in enhancing cultural confidence and other related aspects. This paper analyzes and studies the cultivation of ICC based on the model proposed by Michael Byram. The study uses FLTRP B2U2 as a case example for analysis. The research findings indicate that clarifying unit themes, enriching cultural learning materials, organizing intercultural activities, and conducting ICC assessments are effective strategies for cultivating high school students' ICC.

Keywords: ICC, unit themes, cultivation of ICC.

1. Introduction

This part firstly introduces the background, purpose and significance of this paper, and finally give a brief introduction of the structure of the paper.

English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High School (2017 version, revised in 2020) emphasizes the importance of cultivation of ICC in the quality of the curriculum, core competences and curricular objectives. The senior high school English curriculum aims to assist students in acquiring and applying fundamental knowledge and skills in English, while also fostering the development of cross-cultural communication abilities, expanding their international perspectives, and reinforcing cultural confidence [1]. This is particularly important within the context of globalization, as it encourages the demonstration of cross-cultural cognition, attitudes, and behaviors. At the same time, English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High School (2017 version, revised in 2020) advocates the theme exploration. A unit is a basic part that carries thematic meaning.

The adoption of unit themes offers a structured approach to integrating cultural content and language instruction, thereby providing a fertile ground for cultivating ICC among students. By choosing unit themes that are not only linguistically rich but also culturally significant, educators can create learning environments that are both engaging and meaningful to students. This approach allows for the natural incorporation of intercultural elements into the curriculum, helping students to develop a deeper understanding of their own culture as well as those of others, and ultimately enhancing their ability to communicate effectively in a globalized world.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, to analyze the current status of ICC development within senior high school TEFL programs. Second, to explore the theoretical frameworks and instructional strategies that support the incorporation of intercultural communicative competence into the curriculum through unit themes. Finally, to present a case study that demonstrates the practical application of these strategies, illustrating their effectiveness in fostering ICC

based on unit themes among students.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a background on unit themes and a comprehensive overview of ICC, including its definition, importance, and implications for language education. Section 3, theoretical frameworks and section 4, instructional strategies for cultivating ICC through unit themes are discussed. Section 5 presents a case study that illustrate how these strategies can be successfully implemented in the classroom. Finally, section 6 concludes the paper by summarizing the findings and discussing implications for future research and practice in TEFL in senior high school.

2. Literature Review

In the realm of TEFL, the integration of unit themes has emerged as a pivotal strategy in curriculum design, aimed at enhancing both linguistic proficiency and intercultural awareness among learners. This section reviews existing literature pertinent to unit themes and ICC, elucidating their interconnections and relevance within senior high school educational contexts.

2.1. Unit themes in TEFL

This part will focus on unit themes and unit themes in TEFL in senior high school. Unit themes represent thematic frameworks around which language instruction is organized, encompassing topics that are not only linguistically instructive but also culturally resonant. Within TEFL pedagogy, unit themes serve as scaffolds for language acquisition, providing contextualized learning experiences that encourage deeper engagement with language through meaningful content.

American linguist Ken Goodman (1986) introduced the Whole Language Approach, which subsequently influenced its adoption in second language teaching [2]. Building upon this foundation, B. M. Frazee and R. A. Rudnitski (1995) advocated for unit integrity, emphasizing the cultivation of students' humanistic qualities in their collaborative research [3]. Scholars such as Richards and Rodgers (2001) underscore the significance of thematic instruction in fostering

comprehensive language development, wherein learners not only acquire linguistic proficiency but also deepen their understanding of cultural nuances inherent in the language [4].

The research and implementation of unit theme teaching in China started from the beginning of the 21st century. The thematic context provides the scope of topics and meaningful situations for language learning. Domestic scholar Cheng Xiaotang (2018) discusses the necessity of conducting thematic teaching in the English subject and the advantages of English teaching based on thematic meaning inquiry based on the fundamental principles of thematic teaching [5]. It introduces the design and implementation pathways of English teaching based on thematic meaning inquiry, while also providing relevant teaching suggestions and case studies. Zhang Yangfeng and Liang Xueqin (2021) proposes that thematic units are an instructional approach based on the principle of “integration of language and content teaching”. Learners focus on exploring language learning materials within specific thematic units, applying language to complete authentic tasks in real contexts, and ultimately mastering language skills [6]. Thematic units aim to enhance language proficiency through information acquisition, where language is utilized to obtain information and improve linguistic competence. Wang Yong (2021) explores holistic instructional design based on thematic meaning inquiry units, discussing effective strategies such as overall unit instructional arrangement, hierarchical goal setting within units, step-by-step thematic inquiry teaching, and construction of semantic fields based on themes [7].

To sum up, the unit theme teaching takes a holistic approach to the unit and is led by a thematic idea that combine the knowledge learning and value cultivation together. In this study, the author, following Cheng Xiaotang’s concept of unit theme, conducts a case study centered around the teaching material used in the research (Unit 2 of New Standard English Book 2 published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press).

2.2. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in TEFL

Scholars both domestically and internationally have diverse definitions and perspectives on ICC. Studies on ICC by foreign scholars began in the 1960s and have continued for over half a century. ICC denotes the ability to effectively and appropriately communicate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In the context of TEFL, ICC extends beyond mere linguistic proficiency to encompass intercultural understanding, empathy, and adaptability [8]. As language learners engage with diverse unit themes, they are afforded opportunities to explore cultural perspectives embedded within the language, thereby enhancing their ICC through authentic communicative experiences. B. Spitzberg (1994) believes that intercultural communicative competence consists of three interacting and interdependent factors: knowledge, motivation, and skills [9]. Wen Qiufang (1999) considers foreign language proficiency as a criterion for measuring the level of “intercultural communicative competence” [10]. She proposes that intercultural communicative competence should consist of two parts: communicative competence and cultural competence. Communicative competence comprises linguistic ability, pragmatic ability, and strategic ability, while cross-cultural ability encompasses cross-cultural sensitivity and inclusivity.

According to English Curriculum Standards for General

Senior High School (2017 version, revised in 2020), ICC appears at the nature of the curriculum, the objectives of the curriculum, core competences and so on. The following chart is the summary of the ICC in English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High School (2017 version, revised in 2020).

2.3. The relationship between unit themes and ICC

The symbiotic relationship between unit themes and ICC underscores their combined significance in TEFL pedagogy. As language learners engage with diverse unit themes, they not only enhance their linguistic proficiency but also cultivate a deeper understanding of cultural contexts embedded within the language. This dual emphasis on language and culture fosters the development of ICC by nurturing learners’ ability to navigate and appreciate cultural diversity.

By integrating culturally rich content into language instruction, educators create opportunities for authentic communicative exchanges that transcend linguistic boundaries. These interactions enable learners to develop empathy, tolerance, and flexibility in cross-cultural communication, essential facets of ICC [11]. Moreover, exposure to varied unit themes enriches learners’ perspectives and broadens their worldview, preparing them to interact confidently in multicultural settings. The efficacy of unit themes in enhancing ICC is further underscored by research advocating for culturally responsive teaching practices (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Such practices not only cater to the linguistic needs of learners but also foster an inclusive classroom environment where cultural diversity is celebrated and leveraged as a pedagogical asset. In conclusion, the integration of unit themes in TEFL not only facilitates language acquisition but also plays a pivotal role in developing learners’ intercultural communicative competence. By embracing diverse unit themes, educators empower learners to become proficient communicators who appreciate and navigate the complexities of global interconnectivity with cultural sensitivity and competence.

Zhu Xuejiao, Fan Fangqiong, and Feng Xiaofeng (2021) explored how to cultivate high school students’ intercultural communication competence through unit themes, combined with Michael Byram’s model of intercultural communicative competence. Byram’s model emphasizes four key areas: knowledge, attitudes, skills, and strategies, highlighting their crucial role in successful intercultural communication. This model has become an effective tool for analyzing frameworks for developing intercultural communication competence [12]. In high school English teaching, unit themes are often integrated with real-life contexts to provide students with authentic learning situations. In such contexts, students can acquire language knowledge while experiencing different cultural customs and concepts. Through this approach, students not only enhance their language skills but also develop effective intercultural communication competence. When implementing the unit theme approach, teachers ensure that the curriculum content closely relates to students’ interests, lives, and existing knowledge. This fosters students’ curiosity, enhances their motivation to learn, and helps them better understand cultural differences underlying languages. Furthermore, through collaborative exploration and discussion of unit themes, students gain knowledge about multiculturalism and cultivate a more open and inclusive attitude.

In conclusion, the combination of unit themes and ICC in TEFL not only enhances the effectiveness of language instruction but also equips learners with the skills necessary to navigate a globally interconnected world. As educators continue to innovate and adapt their teaching practices, integrating unit themes and ICC remains integral to fostering language learners who are not only proficient speakers but also culturally sensitive communicators.

3. Theoretical framework: Byram's model of ICC

The choice of Byram's ICC model for this study is grounded in its comprehensive framework that integrates essential elements crucial for effective intercultural communication among high school students. Byram's model emphasizes not only the acquisition of knowledge about diverse cultures but also the cultivation of respectful attitudes, the ability to recognize and reconcile cultural differences, and the development of critical cultural awareness. These components are particularly pertinent in the context of English language teaching in senior high schools, aligning well with the goals set forth in the English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High School (2017 version, revised in 2020) and the Core Competencies of English. By adopting Byram's ICC model, this study aims to explore how cultivating ICC can enhance students' ability to engage meaningfully in cross-cultural interactions, fostering a more inclusive and globally competent student body. This approach is pivotal in preparing students to navigate the complexities of our interconnected world, where effective communication across cultures is increasingly essential for academic, professional, and personal success.

Byram (2009) constructs a model of ICC within the framework of foreign language and cultural education. Byram posits that language learning encompasses a series of meaningful processes involving knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions. His model of Intercultural Communicative Competence integrates five key elements: knowledge, attitudes, correlation, interaction, and critical cultural awareness.

Byram posits that intercultural communicators should possess knowledge in areas such as politics, economics, culture, history, humanities, geography, and customs. The more extensive an individual's understanding of intercultural knowledge, the stronger their sense of identification and the smoother their communication will be. This accumulation of "encyclopedic" knowledge is achieved through long-term comprehension, digestion, and internalization. School language instruction represents the most economical means for high school students to indirectly and effectively acquire knowledge about different countries.

Byram asserts that intercultural communication attitudes encompass valuing oneself and respecting others, recognizing that individuals from different countries may differ in cultural meanings, religious beliefs, and personal behaviors. Educators should cultivate and correct students' attitudes, guiding them to view other cultures from an egalitarian perspective. This involves avoiding blind admiration or outright rejection of certain cultural phenomena, and instead approaching intercultural communication activities with curiosity, skepticism, and a balanced perspective.

According to Byram, the interpretative and correlational skills needed in intercultural communication involve

identifying ethnocentrism, detecting misunderstandings, and reconciling differences based on mutual respect and understanding. As adolescents nearing adulthood, high school students should be capable of recognizing racial superiority, understanding cultural skill barriers, and mediating and alleviating cultural conflicts to address intercultural challenges.

Interaction skills focus on micro-level details such as acquiring new knowledge from cultural practices and organizing social gatherings free from historical or political bias. Byram highlights the importance of timely discovery, flexible handling of information, and discerning attitudes in real-time intercultural communication. In high school classrooms, this skill should be integrated into teaching activities, such as guiding students to learn from others' experiences, apply these lessons to similar situations, and form clear, accurate judgments or infer the meaning of non-verbal behaviors.

People develop their values within specific cultural contexts, and Byram believes that intercultural communicators should be able to recognize and appreciate other cultures while also articulating the possibilities or limitations within their own culture. This entails a critical, independent, and dialectical approach to different cultures, adopting a multicultural perspective and seeking common ground. High school intercultural education should enable students to evaluate various cultures based on objective, consistent criteria.

Therefore, in this study, the paper will adopt Byram's perspective and examine the cultivation of ICC among senior high school students, focusing on attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness in the context of English teaching. This approach aligns with the requirements set forth in the English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High School (2017 version, revised in 2020) and the core competencies of English, emphasizing intercultural teaching. Therefore, this paper is mainly based on the Byram's ICC Model to guide teaching practice and to explore if it can help senior high school students improve their ICC effectively.

4. Methods of Cultivation of Intercultural Communicative Competence in TEFL in Senior High Schools Based on the Unit Themes

This section explores methods for cultivating ICC within the framework of unit themes in high school English language teaching. The discussion begins with clarifying the significance of the theme and delving into its intercultural connotations. This approach involves analyzing the thematic content of each unit to uncover its cultural relevance and implications, thereby enabling students to engage with both linguistic and cultural dimensions more profoundly. Following this, enriching learning texts and expanding intercultural learning is examined. This method emphasizes the integration of diverse cultural perspectives into educational materials, allowing students to encounter and reflect upon various cultural viewpoints related to the unit theme, thus broadening their intercultural understanding. Subsequently, organizing intercultural activities to cultivate intercultural awareness is addressed. This involves designing and implementing interactive activities such as cultural exchange projects and role-playing exercises that reflect the unit theme, thereby providing students with practical

opportunities to apply and enhance their ICC skills. Finally, conducting teaching evaluations to consolidate intercultural communicative competence is discussed. Effective assessment strategies are crucial for measuring students' progress in ICC and for guiding further instructional adjustments. This method includes the use of evaluation tools that assess not only linguistic ability but also intercultural understanding and communication effectiveness.

To effectively cultivate ICC among senior high school students in TEFL, it is essential to design instructional strategies that align with unit themes. By integrating Byram's ICC model into unit-based teaching, educators can create structured learning experiences that promote deep engagement with diverse cultures while advancing English language proficiency. Each unit theme serves as a focal point for exploring not only linguistic elements but also cultural contexts, thereby enhancing students' ability to communicate meaningfully across cultural boundaries. This section examines practical methodologies aimed at developing students' knowledge, attitudes, correlation skills, discovery-interaction abilities, and critical cultural awareness within the framework of unit-specific content and learning objectives.

5. Case study: take FLTRP B2U2 as an example

This case study examines the practical implementation of FLTRP B2U2 Let's celebrate! as a representative example within the context of language teaching. The focus of this analysis is to explore how the FLTRP B2U2 unit facilitates language instruction through its specific pedagogical strategies and instructional design. By delving into the practical aspects of this unit, the study aims to illustrate how its frameworks and methodologies effectively support language learning objectives, enhance student engagement, and foster skill development. Through a detailed examination of instructional practices, teaching materials, and student interactions, this case study provides insights into the operational aspects of FLTRP B2U2 and evaluates its efficacy in achieving educational goals.

It is essential to clarify the overarching theme of the discourses within the unit to ensure a cohesive and focused instructional approach. This involves systematically identifying and articulating the central theme that unifies the various texts and activities featured in the unit. The theme serves as a guiding principle that aligns all instructional materials and learning objectives. By defining the theme, educators can create a coherent framework that integrates diverse discourses, thereby facilitating a more meaningful and contextually relevant learning experience for students.

To foster a comprehensive understanding of intercultural communication, it is imperative to enrich learning materials with diverse and contextually relevant content. This enrichment involves integrating a variety of resources and perspectives that reflect the complexity and dynamism of intercultural interactions. Enriching learning materials means incorporating a range of perspectives from different cultural backgrounds. This includes selecting texts, case studies, multimedia resources, and real-life examples that showcase various cultural viewpoints, practices, and communication styles. In starting out, we can add more festivals around the world. Then teachers can design more activities for students to feel the atmosphere of intercultural communication.

By presenting multiple perspectives, educators can help

students appreciate the richness of cultural diversity and understand the nuances of intercultural exchanges. Using authentic materials—such as articles, videos, interviews, and other resources created by native speakers or cultural insiders—provides students with genuine insights into intercultural communication. Authentic materials offer practical examples of language use, cultural norms, and communication practices, which are crucial for developing a realistic understanding of intercultural interactions. To deepen intercultural learning, it is essential to design interactive activities that encourage active participation and experiential learning. For example, in B2U2 Let's celebrate! We can design the perspectives in this way for students to understand to intercultural communication clearly.

Activities such as role-plays, simulations, and cultural exchange projects allow students to practice intercultural communication skills in realistic scenarios. These activities help students apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts and develop a more nuanced understanding of intercultural dynamics. Incorporate reflective exercises that prompt students to analyze and critically evaluate their own cultural assumptions, biases, and communication strategies. Reflection activities encourage students to consider how their cultural backgrounds influence their interactions and perceptions, fostering greater self-awareness and empathy in intercultural communication. Leverage digital tools and platforms to access a broader range of intercultural materials and facilitate cross-cultural exchanges. Online forums, virtual exchanges, and multimedia resources can enhance students' exposure to global perspectives and provide opportunities for real-time interactions with peers from different cultural backgrounds. By enriching learning materials with diverse, authentic, and interactive content, educators can expand students' intercultural learning experiences.

This approach not only enhances students' understanding of intercultural communication but also equips them with the skills necessary to navigate and contribute positively to a multicultural world.

6. Conclusion

This paper has provided a comprehensive analysis of the cultivation of ICC into educational practices, focusing on the application of Byram's model of ICC and unit theme and its practice through a case study form FLTRP B2U2 Let's celebrate! The exploration of these elements underscores the critical importance of developing ICC in an increasingly globalized world.

The paper began with an examination of the thematic unit on ICC, emphasizing how educational frameworks can incorporate cultural content to enhance students' intercultural understanding. The unit theme provides a structured approach for embedding ICC into curricula, facilitating the development of skills necessary for effective intercultural interactions. This paper delved into Byram's model, which offers a robust theoretical framework for ICC. This model encompasses five key elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. By integrating these components into educational practices, educators can create a comprehensive approach to fostering ICC. The paper discussed various methods for assessing ICC, including self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher evaluation. These methods are crucial for measuring students' progress and effectiveness in intercultural projects. The use of diverse

assessment strategies ensures a holistic evaluation of students' ICC development. Through the case study of "Let's Celebrate!", we illustrated how practical applications of ICC frameworks can be effectively implemented in the classroom. The case study highlighted the benefits of project-based learning in promoting cultural awareness and engagement among students.

The findings suggest that educators should adopt a multifaceted approach to teaching ICC, incorporating both theoretical models and practical applications. The integration of Byram's model provides a structured framework for developing ICC, while case study "Let's Celebrate!" offer tangible examples of how these concepts can be brought to life in educational settings. In curriculum design, educators can incorporate ICC principles and Byram's model into curriculum design to ensure a comprehensive approach to cultural education. Utilizing a variety of assessment methods to evaluate ICC development and ensuring that feedback mechanisms are in place for continuous improvement. Project-based learning needs emphasis. Implementing intercultural projects that encourage active student engagement and real-world application of ICC skills. Further research could explore the long-term impacts of ICC education on students' professional and personal lives. Additionally, expanding studies to include diverse educational contexts and cultural settings could provide deeper insights into the effectiveness and adaptability of ICC frameworks.

In conclusion, this paper conducts an analytical study on the cultivation of ICC through the analysis of unit themes and ICC, based on the ICC model proposed by Michael Byram, in combination with the new curriculum standards for high school English and the holistic teaching concept of units. Taking FLTRP B2U2 as a teaching case, the case analysis concludes that it is feasible and effective to cultivate ICC in high school English under the unit theme. Unit theme teaching is a continuous teaching method that develops and reorganizes teaching content based on curriculum objectives, follows learning patterns, and uses themes as clues. ICC plays a significant role in enhancing cultural confidence and improving cultural output. As a subject teaching (English) major learner who aspires to become a high school English teacher in the future, this study has important guiding significance for future teaching practice. The application of unit theme teaching, with themes running through the entire teaching process, helps cultivate students' ICC learning ability and language application ability, providing learners with a richer and more meaningful learning experience.

Acknowledgment

Time flies, and the completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the generous support and selfless help of many teachers, classmates, and relatives. Here, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to them all.

First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Yang Min. From the conception of the research topic, literature review, and framework construction to the revision of the draft and finalization, every step bears the dedication and wisdom of my supervisor. Their rigorous academic attitude, profound academic proficiency, and insightful perspectives on intercultural communication have provided me with constant research ideas and guidance. Particularly in the theoretical analysis based on Byram's model and the design of the case study on FLTRP B2U2, my supervisor

offered patient guidance on multiple occasions, helping me clarify the research logic and refine the argument details, which ensured the smooth completion of this thesis.

I would like to thank all the teachers who have provided valuable insights during the writing process. Their practical experiences shared in courses and academic seminars regarding the English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High School and unit theme teaching have offered solid practical foundations for this research. Meanwhile, I am grateful to the experts and scholars who participated in the thesis review and put forward revision suggestions; their professional advice helped me identify and address the shortcomings in the research.

Thanks go to my classmates and friends. When I encountered bottlenecks in the research, in-depth discussions with them often sparked new ideas. During the data collection and case analysis stages, their enthusiastic assistance saved me a great deal of time. Exploring issues and countermeasures in intercultural teaching with them made me feel the collective strength of academic research.

Finally, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my family. Their understanding, support, and encouragement during my studies and thesis writing have been the spiritual motivation that enabled me to overcome difficulties and persist.

Due to the limitations of my academic ability, there may be omissions and inadequacies in the thesis. I sincerely welcome criticism and corrections from experts and scholars. Once again, I express my heartfelt thanks to all who have cared for and helped me!

References

- [1] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Ordinary High School English Curriculum Standards [S]. Beijing: People's Education Press, 2017.
- [2] Goodman, K. S. *What's Whole in Whole Language?* [M]. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc, 1986.
- [3] Frazee, B. M., & Rudnitski, R. A. *Integrated Teaching Methods: Theory, Classroom Applications and Field-based Connections* [M]. Albany, N.Y.: Delmar Publishers, 1995.
- [4] Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* [M]. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- [5] Cheng Xiaotang. English Teaching Philosophy and Practice Based on Theme Meaning Exploration [J]. Foreign Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools (Middle School Section), 2018, 41(10): 1-7.
- [6] Zhang Yangfeng, Liang Xueqing. Integrated Teaching Design of English Units for Junior High School Based on Theme Meaning Exploration [J]. Seeker. 2021, (47): 47-48.
- [7] Wang Yong. Integrated Teaching of High School English Units Based on Theme Meaning Exploration [J]. Foreign Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools (Middle School Section), 2021, 44(05): 59-64.
- [8] Byram, M. *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence* [M]. Multilingual Matters, 1997.
- [9] Spitzberg & Cupach, *Interpersonal Communication Competence* [M]. CA: Sage Publications, 1984: 245.
- [10] Wen Qiufang. English Oral Communication: Testing and Teaching [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1999.

- [11] Byram, M. *Intercultural Competence in Foreign Languages: The Intercultural Speaker and the Pedagogy of Foreign Language Education* [M]. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2009.
- [12] Zhu Xuejiao, Fan Fangqiong, Feng Xiaofeng. Cultivating Cross-Cultural Communication Skills in High School English Unit-Based Theme Teaching: A Case Study of Beijing Normal University Edition's Course 1 Unit 3 "Celebrations" [J]. *Campus English*, 2021, (41): 230-231.