

English Teaching and the Cultivation of Core Competencies: Theory, Practice, and Implications for English Education

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Abstract: In recent years, competency-based education has become a dominant trend in educational reform worldwide. Rather than emphasizing the accumulation of linguistic knowledge alone, contemporary English language teaching (ELT) aims to cultivate learners' comprehensive abilities, including language competence, critical thinking, cultural awareness, and autonomous learning. In China, the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) identify four dimensions of core competencies—language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability—as the fundamental objectives of English education. Consequently, English teachers are expected to shift from knowledge-oriented instruction to competency-oriented teaching that supports students' holistic development.

Keywords: English teaching; core competencies; language ability; cultural awareness; competency-based education.

1. Introduction

Globalization, technological advancement, and increasing intercultural communication have significantly transformed the goals of education in the twenty-first century. Modern education is no longer limited to transmitting disciplinary knowledge but is increasingly expected to prepare learners with the competencies required for lifelong learning, social participation, and sustainable development [1]. As a result, competency-based education has become an important direction for curriculum reform in many countries and regions.

Within this context, English language education has experienced a profound transformation [3]. Traditionally, English teaching focused primarily on grammar instruction, vocabulary acquisition, and examination performance. Although these elements remain important, they are insufficient to meet the demands of contemporary society. Today's learners are expected to use English effectively in authentic communicative situations, appreciate cultural diversity, solve real-world problems, think critically, and continue learning independently throughout their lives. Consequently, English teaching has gradually shifted from a knowledge-oriented paradigm to a competency-oriented one [2].

China's educational reform reflects this international trend. The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) propose that English education should cultivate four dimensions of students' core competencies: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability [4]. These competencies represent the comprehensive qualities that students should develop through English learning and serve as the guiding principles for curriculum design, instructional practice, and educational assessment.

Language ability remains the foundation of English learning [5]. However, language proficiency alone does not guarantee successful communication. Learners also need intercultural awareness to understand different values and perspectives, thinking quality to analyze and evaluate information critically, and learning ability to adapt to rapidly

changing knowledge and technologies. Therefore, English teaching should provide authentic learning experiences that integrate language knowledge with meaningful communication, cultural understanding, and cognitive development [6].

At the same time, the role of English teachers has changed considerably. Instead of merely delivering linguistic knowledge, teachers are now expected to create learner-centered classrooms, design authentic communicative tasks, encourage collaboration, and provide continuous formative feedback. The integration of digital technologies, project-based learning, and inquiry-based instruction further enriches opportunities for competency development.

Against this background, it is necessary to explore the intrinsic relationship between English teaching and the cultivation of core competencies. Understanding this relationship not only contributes to the theoretical development of English language education but also provides practical guidance for curriculum implementation and classroom teaching. Therefore, this paper aims to examine how English teaching promotes students' core competencies and to discuss effective instructional strategies that support competency-oriented English education.

2. Literature Review

(1) The Development of Competency-Based Education

Competency-based education has attracted increasing attention over the past two decades. International organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UNESCO have emphasized that education should equip learners with the competencies required to respond to social, technological, and economic changes. Rather than measuring educational success solely through academic achievement, competency-based education focuses on learners' ability to apply knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values in authentic contexts.

The OECD's Future of Education and Skills 2030 framework proposes that students should develop a combination of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies to address complex global challenges. Similarly, UNESCO

highlights lifelong learning, global citizenship, and sustainable development as essential educational goals for the twenty-first century. These international initiatives have profoundly influenced curriculum reforms worldwide, including English language education [7].

In China, competency-based education has become a central principle of curriculum reform. The Ministry of Education introduced the concept of subject core competencies to guide teaching, learning, and assessment across different disciplines. For English education, the curriculum standards emphasize the integration of language learning with cultural understanding, critical thinking, and autonomous learning, reflecting both international educational trends and China's educational objectives.

(2) Core Competencies in English Education

The concept of core competencies in English education extends beyond linguistic knowledge. According to the English Curriculum Standards (2022), English learning should cultivate four interrelated competencies: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability.

Language ability refers to learners' capacity to comprehend and produce spoken and written English in diverse communicative situations. It includes listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing, together with pragmatic competence and communicative strategies.

Cultural awareness emphasizes learners' understanding of different cultures while strengthening confidence in their own cultural identity. Through English learning, students develop intercultural communicative competence and become capable of respecting cultural diversity.

Thinking quality involves logical reasoning, critical analysis, creativity, and problem-solving. Language learning provides abundant opportunities for learners to interpret information, evaluate arguments, compare perspectives, and express independent opinions.

Learning ability refers to learners' capacity for autonomous learning, self-regulation, reflection, and continuous improvement. In the information age, effective learners are expected to employ appropriate learning strategies, utilize digital resources, and monitor their own learning progress.

These four competencies are closely interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Effective English teaching should integrate them rather than treating them as isolated objectives.

(3) Previous Studies on English Teaching and Core Competencies

A growing body of research has examined the relationship between English teaching and competency development. Richards (2015) argues that communicative language teaching encourages meaningful interaction and authentic language use, thereby promoting both communicative competence and learner autonomy. Nation (2013) emphasizes the balanced development of language skills, fluency, and vocabulary through meaningful input and output activities.

Research has also highlighted the importance of higher-order thinking in language classrooms. Ellis (2017) suggests that task-based language teaching enables learners to negotiate meaning, solve problems collaboratively, and develop critical thinking through authentic communication. Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) further argue that learner engagement, motivation, and emotional well-being are essential components of successful competency-oriented education.

Chinese scholars have also contributed significantly to this

field. Wang Qiang emphasizes that English teaching should integrate language learning with competency cultivation rather than focusing exclusively on examination performance. Cheng Xiaotang argues that classroom activities should create meaningful contexts in which students actively construct knowledge through communication and inquiry. Huang Guowen further points out that discourse analysis and authentic language use play important roles in cultivating students' communicative competence and critical literacy.

Although existing studies have explored different aspects of competency-oriented English education, further research is needed to explain systematically how English teaching contributes to each dimension of core competencies and how classroom practices can better achieve these educational goals. The following sections therefore examine the relationship between English teaching and core competencies in greater detail and propose practical strategies for competency-oriented English instruction.

3. Relationship between English Teaching and Core Competencies

The relationship between English teaching and core competencies is both reciprocal and dynamic. On the one hand, core competencies define the ultimate goals of English education; on the other hand, effective English teaching serves as the primary means through which these competencies are cultivated. Under the competency-based curriculum, English learning is no longer regarded as the simple acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Instead, it is viewed as a comprehensive process that integrates language use, cognitive development, intercultural communication, and lifelong learning. Therefore, English classrooms should provide authentic, meaningful, and student-centered learning experiences that foster learners' overall development.

(1) English Teaching and the Development of Language Ability

Language ability is the cornerstone of English core competencies and the foundation upon which the other competencies are built. It refers not only to learners' mastery of linguistic knowledge but also to their ability to understand, interpret, and express meaning effectively in diverse communicative contexts. Consequently, English teaching should move beyond traditional grammar translation methods and create opportunities for authentic communication.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) provides a theoretical basis for developing students' language ability. According to this approach, language is best acquired through meaningful interaction rather than mechanical drills. Classroom activities such as pair work, group discussions, role plays, debates, presentations, and problem-solving tasks encourage students to use English for genuine communication. These activities promote both linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency while increasing learners' confidence in using English.

Reading and writing instruction also play a crucial role in language development. Instead of focusing exclusively on vocabulary memorization or sentence-level analysis, teachers should guide students to analyze text structures, identify authors' intentions, evaluate arguments, and integrate information from multiple sources. Such instruction helps students improve their discourse competence and academic literacy while simultaneously enhancing their reading

comprehension and writing abilities.

Listening and speaking activities should likewise emphasize authentic communication. The use of multimedia resources, podcasts, interviews, news reports, and classroom discussions enables students to experience different accents, communicative styles, and cultural contexts. Through repeated exposure and meaningful practice, learners gradually develop communicative competence suitable for real-life situations.

Furthermore, language ability develops most effectively when the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—are integrated rather than taught separately. Integrated-skill instruction reflects the natural use of language and provides students with richer opportunities to process and produce meaningful discourse.

(2) English Teaching and the Cultivation of Cultural Awareness

Language and culture are inseparable. Every language embodies the history, values, customs, and ways of thinking of its speakers. Therefore, English teaching inevitably involves cultural learning, making it an ideal platform for cultivating students' cultural awareness.

In the past, English teaching often focused primarily on introducing English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. Although understanding these cultures remains important, contemporary English education places greater emphasis on intercultural communicative competence. Students should learn not only about other cultures but also how to communicate respectfully and effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

An equally important objective is strengthening students' confidence in their own culture. Under the current curriculum reform, English classrooms are expected to help students "tell China's stories well" in English. Teachers can introduce topics related to Chinese traditional festivals, historical figures, technological achievements, ecological civilization, and contemporary social development. Through discussing these topics in English, students learn to express Chinese perspectives to international audiences while deepening their understanding of their own cultural identity.

Comparative cultural activities further enhance intercultural understanding. For example, students may compare family values, educational systems, environmental policies, or holiday traditions across different countries. Such comparisons encourage learners to recognize both cultural similarities and differences, avoid stereotypes, and develop open-minded attitudes toward global diversity.

Project-based learning offers another effective approach to cultural education. Students may investigate international issues, conduct interviews with foreign students, or prepare multimedia presentations on cultural topics. These authentic learning experiences foster curiosity, empathy, and intercultural communication skills while integrating language learning with cultural exploration.

(3) English Teaching and the Development of Thinking Quality

One of the most significant features of competency-oriented English education is the emphasis on thinking quality. Language learning is not merely a process of memorizing linguistic forms; it is also a process of developing reasoning, analysis, creativity, and judgment.

English classrooms naturally provide abundant opportunities for cultivating higher-order thinking because

learners are constantly required to interpret meanings, evaluate information, solve problems, and express opinions. Teachers should therefore design instructional activities that encourage students to think deeply rather than simply recall factual information.

Questioning techniques play an important role in promoting thinking quality. Instead of asking only factual questions such as "What happened?" or "Who is the main character?", teachers can ask open-ended questions such as "Why do you agree with the author's opinion?", "What alternative solution would you suggest?", or "How would you evaluate this decision from another perspective?" These questions stimulate analysis, inference, evaluation, and creativity.

Reading instruction is particularly valuable for developing critical thinking. Students can examine authors' viewpoints, identify supporting evidence, distinguish facts from opinions, detect bias, and compare multiple perspectives on the same issue. Such activities cultivate logical reasoning and critical literacy, enabling learners to become thoughtful readers rather than passive receivers of information.

Collaborative learning also promotes thinking quality. During discussions, debates, and group projects, students negotiate meaning, defend their viewpoints, challenge assumptions, and refine their arguments. These interactions encourage reflective thinking and improve both cognitive and communicative abilities.

Moreover, teachers should create classroom environments where students feel comfortable expressing diverse opinions. Respectful dialogue and intellectual openness are essential conditions for developing independent thinking and creativity.

(4) English Teaching and the Enhancement of Learning Ability

Learning ability refers to students' capacity for autonomous learning, self-management, reflection, and continuous improvement. In today's rapidly changing world, learners cannot rely solely on classroom instruction; they must develop the ability to learn independently throughout their lives.

English teaching contributes significantly to this competency by helping students acquire effective learning strategies. Teachers should explicitly introduce cognitive strategies such as note-taking, summarizing, predicting, and inferencing, as well as metacognitive strategies including goal setting, planning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation. These strategies enable learners to regulate their own learning processes and improve learning efficiency.

Technology also plays an increasingly important role in fostering autonomous learning. Digital platforms, online dictionaries, language learning applications, artificial intelligence tools, and multimedia resources provide students with abundant opportunities for individualized learning beyond the classroom. Teachers should guide students to use these resources critically and responsibly rather than relying on them passively.

Formative assessment further supports the development of learning ability. Instead of evaluating students solely through final examinations, teachers should provide continuous feedback based on classroom participation, portfolios, peer assessment, self-reflection, and project performance. Such assessment helps students recognize their strengths and weaknesses while encouraging continuous improvement.

In addition, learner autonomy can be strengthened through project-based learning and inquiry-based instruction. When

students investigate authentic problems, collect information, collaborate with peers, and present solutions, they assume greater responsibility for their own learning. These experiences cultivate self-confidence, perseverance, and lifelong learning habits.

Overall, language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability are not independent outcomes but mutually reinforcing dimensions of students' comprehensive development. Effective English teaching should therefore integrate these competencies into every aspect of curriculum design, classroom instruction, learning activities, and assessment. By doing so, English education can better prepare learners for successful communication, intercultural understanding, critical participation, and lifelong learning in an increasingly interconnected world.

4. Strategies for Cultivating Core Competencies in English Teaching

The cultivation of core competencies cannot be achieved through isolated classroom activities or the transmission of linguistic knowledge alone. Instead, it requires systematic changes in teaching philosophy, curriculum design, classroom interaction, assessment, and teacher professional development. Competency-oriented English teaching should create meaningful learning experiences that enable students to apply language knowledge in authentic contexts while simultaneously developing their cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. The following strategies are particularly important for promoting students' comprehensive development.

(1) Adopting a Learner-Centered Teaching Approach

One of the most fundamental changes in competency-based education is the transition from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered learning. In traditional English classrooms, teachers often dominate classroom discourse by explaining vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures, while students mainly receive information passively. Such an instructional model limits learners' opportunities to communicate, explore, and think independently.

A learner-centered classroom encourages students to actively construct knowledge through participation and interaction. Teachers should create learning environments in which students are encouraged to ask questions, express opinions, negotiate meaning, and solve problems collaboratively. Activities such as pair discussions, role plays, debates, interviews, and cooperative projects provide authentic opportunities for communication and enhance students' engagement in language learning.

Moreover, learner-centered instruction respects students' individual differences. Since learners possess different language proficiency levels, interests, and learning styles, teachers should provide differentiated instruction and flexible learning tasks to meet diverse learning needs. Personalized learning not only improves learning effectiveness but also strengthens students' confidence and motivation.

(2) Creating Authentic Learning Contexts

Language is learned most effectively when it is used for meaningful communication rather than mechanical practice. Therefore, competency-oriented English teaching should provide authentic contexts that closely resemble real-life communication.

Teachers can design situational tasks related to students' daily lives, social issues, or global challenges. For example,

students may simulate ordering food in a restaurant, planning an international trip, participating in an environmental campaign, or interviewing community members. Such tasks require students to integrate vocabulary, grammar, communication strategies, and cultural knowledge to accomplish meaningful objectives.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is another effective approach for creating authentic learning experiences. In project-based classrooms, students investigate real-world questions, collect information from multiple sources, collaborate with peers, and present their findings through oral presentations, reports, or multimedia products. Throughout this process, students simultaneously develop language ability, critical thinking, teamwork, creativity, and self-management.

Authentic materials also enrich classroom learning. Newspapers, podcasts, videos, advertisements, speeches, websites, and literary works expose students to genuine language use while broadening their cultural perspectives. These materials help bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world communication.

(3) Integrating Higher-Order Thinking into Classroom Instruction

Thinking quality represents one of the defining characteristics of competency-oriented English education. Therefore, teachers should intentionally integrate higher-order thinking into every stage of instruction rather than treating it as an additional objective.

Effective questioning strategies are particularly valuable. Teachers should gradually move beyond factual comprehension questions toward analytical, evaluative, and creative questions. For example, after reading an article, students may be asked to evaluate the author's arguments, compare different viewpoints, propose alternative solutions, or predict future developments. Such questions stimulate deeper cognitive processing and encourage independent thinking.

Argumentative writing also promotes critical thinking. Instead of merely summarizing reading materials, students should learn to construct logical arguments supported by evidence, analyze opposing opinions, and express their own perspectives clearly. Peer review activities further strengthen students' ability to evaluate ideas critically and provide constructive feedback.

Problem-solving tasks provide another opportunity for developing thinking quality. Students may work collaboratively to address issues related to environmental protection, public health, technological innovation, or cultural communication. These activities integrate language learning with inquiry, reasoning, and decision-making.

(4) Strengthening Formative Assessment

Assessment plays a decisive role in shaping teaching and learning. If assessment focuses exclusively on grammar and vocabulary tests, classroom instruction will inevitably prioritize memorization over competency development. Therefore, assessment methods should be aligned with the objectives of core competencies.

Formative assessment emphasizes continuous learning rather than final outcomes. Teachers should observe students' classroom participation, communication performance, project completion, collaborative learning, and reflective journals throughout the learning process. Timely feedback helps students recognize their strengths and identify areas for improvement.

Self-assessment and peer assessment are equally important

components of formative assessment. When students evaluate their own learning or provide feedback to classmates, they become more aware of learning objectives and develop stronger self-regulation abilities. These assessment practices encourage reflection, responsibility, and autonomous learning.

Portfolio assessment is another valuable tool. Students can collect essays, presentations, reading reflections, project reports, and learning journals over time, allowing both teachers and students to observe long-term progress across multiple dimensions of core competencies.

(5) Promoting Teachers' Professional Development

Teachers are the key agents in implementing competency-oriented education. Their professional beliefs, instructional knowledge, and classroom practices directly influence students' competency development.

To meet the requirements of the new curriculum, English teachers should continuously update their educational philosophies and instructional strategies. Professional development may include curriculum training, action research, lesson study, academic conferences, and collaborative teaching communities. Through reflective practice, teachers can evaluate the effectiveness of their instruction and make continuous improvements.

Digital competence has also become increasingly important. Teachers should learn to integrate educational technologies such as online learning platforms, artificial intelligence tools, virtual communication environments, and multimedia resources into classroom instruction. Technology should not replace teachers but rather enhance interaction, personalization, and learning efficiency.

Furthermore, teachers should strengthen interdisciplinary awareness. English education naturally connects with history, geography, science, literature, and art. Interdisciplinary learning broadens students' perspectives, encourages knowledge integration, and creates more authentic learning experiences that support the cultivation of core competencies.

In summary, cultivating students' core competencies requires coordinated efforts involving learner-centered pedagogy, authentic communication, higher-order thinking, formative assessment, and continuous teacher professional development. Only when these elements work together can English teaching fully realize the educational goals of competency-based curriculum reform.

5. Conclusion

The implementation of competency-based education has fundamentally reshaped the objectives and practices of English language teaching. Rather than focusing solely on linguistic knowledge, contemporary English education seeks to cultivate learners' comprehensive competencies that enable them to communicate effectively, think critically, appreciate cultural diversity, and engage in lifelong learning.

This paper has examined the close relationship between English teaching and the cultivation of core competencies. The discussion demonstrates that English teaching

contributes significantly to the development of language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. These four competencies are interconnected and should be cultivated through integrated instructional practices rather than separate teaching objectives.

The analysis also suggests that effective competency-oriented English teaching requires substantial changes in educational philosophy and classroom practice. Learner-centered instruction, authentic communicative tasks, project-based learning, higher-order thinking activities, formative assessment, and continuous teacher professional development all play indispensable roles in supporting students' holistic development. In addition, digital technologies and interdisciplinary learning provide new opportunities for enriching English education and preparing students for the challenges of an increasingly interconnected world.

Despite the progress achieved through curriculum reform, challenges remain in translating competency-based principles into everyday classroom practice. Some teachers continue to face difficulties in balancing examination requirements with competency development, while limited teaching resources and assessment constraints may also affect implementation. Future research may therefore investigate effective classroom models, innovative assessment systems, and teacher professional learning communities that facilitate the practical realization of competency-oriented English education.

In conclusion, English teaching serves not only as a means of language instruction but also as an important pathway for cultivating students' comprehensive competencies. By integrating language learning with critical thinking, cultural understanding, and autonomous learning, English education can better prepare learners to become competent communicators, responsible global citizens, and lifelong learners in the twenty-first century.

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