

# The Cultivation of Intercultural Communicative Competence in Senior High School Vocabulary Teaching

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**Abstract:** The cultivation of intercultural communicative competence not only helps students to broaden their international horizons and eliminate intercultural communicative barriers during communication, but also helps to promote cultural exchanges under the background of globalization. In addition, the high school English curriculum standard also puts forward certain requirements for the cultivation of students' intercultural communicative competence, thus it is necessary to cultivate students' intercultural communicative competence in high school English teaching. Adhering to literacy orientation, respect for differences and an ideological basis should be the principles of cultivating intercultural communicative competence. Language is the carrier of culture, and the cultivation of students' cross-cultural communicative competence can be carried out throughout vocabulary teaching by explaining the different meanings of vocabulary, explaining the background cultural knowledge of vocabulary, improving cultural sensitivity through lexical cultural comparison to strengthen students' cross-cultural communicative competence.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Communicative Competence; Senior High School English Teaching; Vocabulary Teaching.

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## 1. Literature Review

### 1.1. The Concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence Abroad

Intercultural communicative competence is a complex concept that has been discussed by international scholars for more than half a century.

Ruben (1976) defines intercultural communicative competence as "a kind of ability to have a distinctive way of doing the same activities that individuals in a given environment should have in order meet his or her basic requirements, to satisfy his or her character, and to achieve his or her goals and expectations" Perry (2011) argues that many scholars have given definitions to intercultural communication competence and although none of the definitions are universally accepted, the definitions and theoretical generalizations proposed by scholars acknowledge that "intercultural competence refers to the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds."

Fantini (2000) argues that intercultural communicative competence is "a kind of complex ability that a person needed to perform in an effective and appropriate way when communicating with members who are linguistically and culturally different from ourselves in specific context".

According to Barrett (2011), intercultural communicative competence are a set of abilities, practices, and information needed to communicate ideas, intentions, or feelings with individuals from different cultures.

### 1.2. The Concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence at Home

When discussing intercultural communication competence, some scholars also often talk about intercultural competence, such as Yang Ying and Zhuang Enping (2007) who equate intercultural communication competence with intercultural competence as the same concept, and they believe that "it is conducive to freeing our conceptions from the narrow vision

of linguistic communication to equate intercultural communication competence with intercultural competence, considering the importance of intercultural awareness, thinking skills, nonverbal communication and communication strategies." In addition, the scholar Wen Qiufang (2004) believes that intercultural communication competence includes two parts: communicative competence and intercultural competence. Liu Xuehui (2003) interprets intercultural communication competence from a constructivist perspective. He believes that intercultural communication competence is a comprehensive, multidimensional concept, in addition to knowledge, there are also thinking, behavior and even emotional and personality dimensions.

Although scholars have different definitions of intercultural communication competence, a summary of their commonalities reveals that intercultural communication competence not just emphasizes a single linguistic communication competence, but also involves various aspects such as cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies. In order to successfully communicate across cultures, the cognitive level of competence emphasizes that learners need to acquire specific cultural knowledge, including knowledge of the politics, economy, culture, geography, history, religion, etc. of their own and other countries. Emotional level competencies include love for the traditional culture of their own nation and respect and appreciation for the excellent cultures of other nations. Behavioral level competencies include linguistic competencies, non-verbal competencies, and the ability to adapt to the culture of different environments.

## 2. The Significance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence

### 2.1. Broaden International Horizon

International horizon refers to a comprehensive understanding and concern for things, cultures, politics, and

economics of countries and regions around the world. Globalization has become the current unavoidable trend of the times, and China is becoming more and more closely connected with the world. People's lives, studies and work will be affected by globalization. If our students do not have an international horizon, it will be difficult for them to understand and respond to the challenges and opportunities brought about by globalization.

## 2.2. Removing Communication Barriers

The ultimate purpose of language learning is for communication, and there are significant differences between China and Western countries in terms of their politics, culture and values. If people of the two sides fail to understand each other's cultural customs and cultural backgrounds, misunderstandings may arise during communication, resulting in barriers to cross-cultural communication. For example, Chinese people sometimes ask about people's age, job and marital status when talking to strangers as a greeting for the first time to better know each other. However, for Westerners, these are extremely private questions, and talking about these for the first time will make the other person feel offended and cause discomfort.

Therefore, language learners are supposed to not only learn language knowledge, but also have a deep understanding of the cultural connotations behind the language knowledge so that they can eliminate cultural barriers and effectively communicate and interact across cultures.

## 2.3. Promoting Cultural Communication

The high school English textbook introduces a lot of knowledge about the customs, history and culture of Chinese and foreign countries. Students learn these cultural knowledge, which on the one hand helps them deepen their understanding of their own culture and better introduce and promote the excellent Chinese traditional culture when they communicate across cultures. On the other hand, it helps students deepen their understanding of other national cultures, show the respect of cultural differences in various countries and regions around the world, and promote international cultural communication and understanding.

# 3. The Principles of Cultivating Intercultural Communicative Competence

## 3.1. The Principle of Literacy-orientation

The literacy-orientation implies that the development of intercultural communication competence for high school students should be oriented to the development of students' core literacy. Core literacy refers to some essential characters and key competencies that students should possess. Therefore, developing students' intercultural communication competence under the literacy orientation requires that students must have correct intercultural cognition, attitude and behavior orientation, such as having certain cultural sensitivity and respecting cultural differences, with the ultimate goal of enhancing students' ability to use intercultural knowledge and skills to solve problems in specific communicative contexts.

## 3.2. The Principle of Respecting Differences

In cross-cultural communication, different countries have many different customs due to cultural differences. What we

should keep in mind is that civilization is not superior or inferior, and cultures are equal to each other and we are supposed to show the mutual respect and understanding in the face of cultural differences. For example, in India and some countries of Africa and Middle East, many people are still used to eating with their hands. Because Indians believe that much of the pleasure in eating comes from the sense of touch, and that knives, forks and chopsticks prevent this sensation and pleasure. What's more, they believe using hands to grasp the food allows them to know the temperature of the food in advance and avoid burning their tongue or mouth. Eating with your hands may seem unhygienic to many people, but it is a tradition in many parts of India. Another example is that Muslims do not eat pork. The main reason why Muslims do not eat pork is out of religious belief and in obedience to the command of Allah. The Quran explicitly prohibits eating pork or pork products in several places, considering pork to be filthy, ugly, and greedy, and that eating it will affect one's morality. Therefore, if we have Muslim friends or go to some Muslim countries, we must respect this local custom and culture and mustn't push them to eat the pork.

All in all, once we set foot in a foreign country, we need to be highly sensitive to every action of the locals. Don't make a fuss about seemingly rude behavior, but try to make yourself at ease and show due respect and understanding of different cultures.

## 3.3. The Principle of Ideological Basis

The formation of students' values is a dynamic process. Therefore, when teachers teach about the culture of Western countries, they must do so in accordance with the current characteristics of students' minds.

On the one hand, they should try to teach some ideological views that are in line with mainstream values, and if they encounter some unhealthy or ideologically different contents, teachers are supposed to play a full role in guiding and encouraging students to have a critical understanding of them, so as to enhance students' ability to distinguish right from wrong and then establish correct values and a correct outlook on life and the world.

On the other hand, when learning about the excellent cultures of other nations, teachers should focus on guiding students to learn to resist the invasion of other countries' ideas and cultures, enhance their sense of identity with their own culture, and be able to take the initiative to promote the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation.

# 4. Vocabulary Teaching and Cultivation of Intercultural Communicative Competence

## 4.1. The Importance of Language to Cultivation of Intercultural Communicative Competence

Language is a social phenomenon, a cultural carrier, and at the same time an important part of culture. (Jia Yuxin, 1997) Vocabulary is the basic element that constitutes language, and because cultural differences are often expressed through vocabulary, the explanation of words is also bound to reflect the differences between peoples or cultures. Due to the differences in geography, religion and values in different countries, words expressing the same concept are bound to have different associative meanings attached to the concept of

vocabulary under the effect of their unique cultural traditions. If one does not understand the cultural connotations and differences of different words, one may not fully accept the culture and values behind the words. Therefore, vocabulary teaching cannot just simply explore the phonological, grammatical and syntactic features of vocabulary, it must be integrated with lexical culture. The purpose of vocabulary teaching is not only to make students know the vocabulary, but more importantly, to master the proper usage of it in real communicative situations. Students are supposed to take into account the pragmatic features, cultural connotations and communicative functions of words when speaking terms to ensure smooth communication.

Leech (1981) classifies lexical meanings into seven types: conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, thematic meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, collocative meaning, and reflected meaning. In the following, I will focus on conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, collocational meaning and affective meaning to explore the differences between English and Chinese languages at the lexical level, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural connotation of specific words and their cultural differences.

## 4.2. Teaching Vocabularies with Different Conceptual Meaning

Conceptual meaning is the literal or core meaning represented by a word itself, which is the basic meaning of word in linguistic communication. If the conceptual meaning of a word is not understood correctly, it will cause communication conflicts. For example, the word "农民" in Chinese represents people who are engaged in long-term agricultural production without any derogatory meaning. In English, although both "peasant" and "farmer" can be translated as "农民", peasant conveys a strong pejorative meaning. Peasant in the Oxford Dictionary refers to "a person who is rude, behaves badly, or has little education". In the New Wechsler Dictionary, it generally refers to an uneducated person of low status.

The conceptual meanings of words are not exactly equivalent between English and Chinese. For example, restroom in English refers to a room with a toilet in a public place, such as theatre or restaurant, but in Chinese it means "休息室". While lounge in English refer to a public room for waiting or relaxing in, which equals to the "休息室" in Chinese. And in Chinese the word "爷爷" can not only refer to the father of your mother or father, but also can be used to refer to an older person of similar generation or grade as grandfather. But in English, grandfather generally just refers to the father of your father or mother.

Generally speaking, the conceptual meaning of vocabulary is relatively stable and does not change much. However, it should be noted that there are some words in the language whose conceptual meaning will change with the development of society and time flying. For example, the word wife, whose original conceptual meaning is woman not necessarily married, such as housewife, but with the development of society, the conceptual meaning of wife now refers exclusively to a married woman.

Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, confusion about the conceptual meaning of words can lead to pragmatic mistakes.

## 4.3. Teaching Vocabularies with Different Connotative Meaning

The meaning that a word has attached to its conceptual meaning as a result of denotation is called connotative meaning. (Zhu Yafu,2005) This type of meaning often conveys the emotion or attitude people have toward the person or thing to which the word refers. Actually, the connotative meaning of words is related to the environment in which an individual lives in the perspective of intercultural communication, and people in different countries or regions understand the connotative meaning of the same word in different ways. This is because they differ in living environment, customs, educational background and cultural background. The author will explain the different connotations of colors, animals and numbers in Chinese and Western cultures as examples in the following.

Firstly, there are color words in both Chinese and foreign languages, while they have very different cultural connotations. For example, red, in Chinese, implies good luck, happiness and prosperity, which can explain why Chinese people like to decorate with red on major occasions or important festivals, such as red couplets and red lanterns, etc. While in English-speaking countries, red is often associated with anger, rage, and violence, etc., such as a red battle. In addition, unlike Chinese culture which symbolizes fortune and profit, red also symbolizes losses in Western culture, such as red figure and red ink both indicate a financial crisis. White also has different connotative meanings in China and West countries, for example, white in Western culture symbolizes purity and innocence. When westerners get married, the bride will wear a white dress. White day is an auspicious day, and white lie refers to a lie out of kindness. While in traditional Chinese culture, white is a taboo color in most cases. It symbolizes terror, such as the brutal rule of the Kuomintang during the reign of the Kuomintang was called the White Terror, and white also symbolizes death in China, such as Chinese funerals are mostly decorated in white.

Secondly, some animal words also have different connotations in China and West. For example, the dragon symbolizes the imperial power in the era of Chinese feudal dynasties. And the dragon is the image of divine authority and supremacy in the eyes of Chinese people even to this day. Therefore, in China, the dragon symbolizes good luck, authority, wealth and prosperity. There are many Chinese idioms with good wishes that contain dragons, such as "龙凤呈祥" "龙飞凤舞" "望子成龙", etc. However, in Western culture, dragon is a symbol of evil. In the British and Americans' mind, the dragon is a ferocious beast and the embodiment of the devil. In Bible, Satan, who is the devil opposes God, is called the great dragon. In modern English, using dragon to describe people often contains derogatory meanings. Take dog for another example. Westerners have the habits of keeping pets, especially dogs. They value the dog's intelligence and faithfulness, and treat the dog as the best friend. So the dog is a symbol of loyalty in the West, and some proverbs related to dogs also contain positive meanings, such as love me love my dog, a lucky dog. However, most of time, the purpose of keeping a dogs for Chinese is just to look after the house, so the status of dogs is much lower than the dogs in Western countries. Idioms and proverbs always have derogatory meanings when dogs are used to describe people, such as "狗仗人势"、"狗眼看人低"and so on.

Thirdly, numbers are common in human interaction and are

an indispensable part of social communication. Many numbers have different connotations and meanings in Chinese and Western cultures, and understanding the cultural connotations of different numbers can also help avoid embarrassment and misunderstandings caused by cultural differences when communicating. For example, the number 6 is an auspicious number in China, symbolizing happiness and well-being and smoothness, such as the idiom “六六大顺”. However, in the West, the number 6 is an unlucky number. What’s more, due to influence of psychological factors and religious philosophy, there are also some numbers that are considered taboo in Chinese and Western cultures. For example, the Chinese rarely use the number 4, because 4 sounds like the Chinese word “死”, and it sounds very unlucky, so the Chinese will avoid to choose and pronounce this number. In the West, the number 13 is regarded as a number that brings bad luck to people. Because according to Bible, Jesus had a dinner with his disciples before he was victimized, and the thirteenth disciple who attended the dinner was Jewish, causing Jesus to suffer and die. And the date of that day was exactly the 13th. This is why the West takes the 13th as a symbol of misfortune, believing that it brings calamity to people. Therefore, theaters, rooms, floors, etc. in British and American countries skip the number 13, and people usually do not choose to make schedules on the 13th.

#### **4.4. Teaching Vocabularies with Different Collocative Meaning**

The collocative meaning is the meaning of words in specific contexts, and it is the meaning that words have when they are collocated with other words in fixed combinations. (Zhu Yafu, 2005) The collocation of words can be roughly divided into the following cases: First, when the same word is collocated with different words, they will have different collocative meanings. For example, “present” in “people present” means “show up”, while in “present situation” it means “current”. Secondly, although some synonyms in English have the same conceptual meaning, they can produce different meanings when collocated with different words. For example, “pretty” and “handsome” are a pair of synonyms, but their collocative meanings are different. Pretty is often used to describe girl, woman, etc., while handsome is often used to describe boy, man, etc. What’s more, when “dead” is used as an adverb meaning completely, exactly, it is often collocated with beat, boring, sad, etc., while highly is often used in conjunction with positive adjectives, such as highly important, highly intelligent, highly successful, etc. Thirdly, the same word is used with different prepositions, which can also produce different collocation meanings. For example, both “drive in” and “drive at” mean to arrive, but “arrive in” is usually followed by a country, region, city or other big regional nouns, such as “arrive in Paris/China”, while “arrive at” is usually followed by a specific address, such as “drive at school/bus station”. Fourthly, the collocation of the coronary is also very important. For example, although both words mean few, “a few” is used in the affirmative way, while “few” is used in the negative way.

Therefore, the collocation of vocabulary is very important, and if the collocation is not proper, it will cause misunderstanding. Teachers should focus on improving students' collocation awareness and collocation ability in the process of vocabulary teaching. Firstly, they should focus on cultivating students' collocation awareness and forming their sense of language, such as doing fixed collocations exercise

more during the teaching process. Secondly, the corresponding context should be set. When teachers explain vocabulary to students, they should put the vocabulary in a specific context, so that students can better grasp the usage of vocabulary collocation in the context. Finally, they should pay attention to the differences between the English and Chinese languages and avoid the negative transfer of the native language when learning the collocation usage of words.

#### **4.5. Teaching Vocabularies with Different Affective Meaning**

Affective meaning is usually used to express the speaker's feelings, including his attitude or personal judgments about the communicative object and the thing he is talking about. Emotional meaning is usually not expressed literally, but through conceptual, connotative, or social meaning. For example, the sentence “Tom is a woman.” is to convey the emotional meaning through the word “woman”. This sentence may imply that Tom is as attentive as a woman or other feminine qualities, which has a praising attitude. Or it may want to convey that Tom is as unmanly as a woman, which has a derogatory meaning. But the actual attitude to be conveyed depends on the specific context. Another example, the two sentences “My wife is working in the company.” and “My little wife is working in the company.” convey different affective meanings. In the latter sentence, the word “little” shows the man's love and care for his wife, while the former sentence does not convey such feelings.

Some words have the same conceptual meaning, but the affective meaning conveyed can be different, such as the words “politician” and “statesman”. The former contains a pejorative meaning, while the latter contains a positive one. “Slender” and “skinny” is another pair of words that have different affective meaning with same conceptual meaning. The former has a positive meaning and the latter has a derogatory one. Skinny is usually used to describe a person who is very thin, especially in a way that you find unpleasant or ugly. So, if you use the word skinny to describe a girl who is fit and thin, it is likely to cause others to be upset and feel that they are being sarcastic, which may cause confuse and misunderstandings.

Therefore, in the process of communication, it is also very important to master the affective meaning of different words. Students are supposed not only to understand the emotional meaning implied by different words, but also to learn to use the appropriate words to convey their feelings and attitudes.

#### **4.6. Implications for Vocabulary Teaching from An Intercultural Communication Perspective**

Firstly, teachers should focus on teaching different meanings of vocabulary.

As mentioned above, besides the conceptual meaning, it is equally important to understand the connotative meaning, collocative meaning and affective meaning of vocabulary. Because in cross-cultural communication, many communication barriers are often caused by pragmatic errors. Therefore, teachers should focus on explaining the different meanings of vocabulary and their usage in different contexts in the process of vocabulary teaching.

Secondly, paying attention to the lexical gap of word's conceptual meaning.

Since human languages and cultures have some commonalities, there are relevant equivalents among various

languages. Due to the differences among various languages and cultures, there are also some words in one language do not have equivalents or fits in another language, and this situation is called lexical gap (Zhou Yuzhong, 1991). For example, in terms of address, the Chinese words “姑姑”、“舅妈”、“大娘”、“小婶”cannot find exact equivalents in English, and they are all referred to by the word “aunt” in English. And the word “叔叔”“舅舅”“大伯”“小叔” are all referred to by the word uncle in English.

When teaching these kinds of words that cannot be fully equivalent in English and Chinese, teachers should pay attention to the comparison of these vocabularies and explain the differences in the conceptual meaning of these words clearly to student so that they can understand the differences.

Thirdly, integrating cultural background knowledge in vocabulary teaching.

It is not enough to simply explore the phonological, grammatical and syntactic features of vocabulary in vocabulary teaching. It is important to understand both the conceptual meaning of vocabulary and the connotative meaning of vocabulary. Only by mastering the meaning of vocabulary in a specific cultural context can we understand the rich cultural information in vocabulary and thus successfully communicate. In the classroom teaching, teachers should consciously focus on the explanation of vocabulary background knowledge and actively introduce the culture of vocabulary. When encountering vocabularies with cultural connotation, teachers can introduce mythological allusions, geographical environment, political history, values, religious beliefs and so on related to it in conjunction with the teaching materials.

For example, the third rib is often used in English to describe the loved person, and if we do not understand the cultural background behind this word, we cannot understand its connotation. According to the Bible, God built a Garden of Eden in the East and created Adam. When Adam fell asleep, God took the third rib of him and used it to create Eve, who later married and lived happily ever after. Therefore, the third rib is now commonly used to describe lovers. Take “waterloo” as another example. The conceptual meaning of the word waterloo is the name of a town in Belgium, but it has the connotative meaning of "a decisive or final defeat or setback", and when explaining its connotation, teachers can explain it in the context of history: the term originated in 1815, when Napoleon ended his political career with a disastrous defeat at the Battle of Waterloo. Therefore, “meet one's waterloo” is often used to describe someone who has suffered a fatal blow.

It can be seen that the explanation of cultural background knowledge of vocabulary is important for students to deeply understand the cultural connotation of vocabulary, and it can also enhance students' interest in vocabulary learning.

Fourthly, improving cultural sensitivity through lexical-cultural comparison.

There are great differences between Chinese and Western cultures, and only through cultural comparison can we discover the similarities and differences between the language structures and cultures of the native and target languages, thus improving the sensitivity of cross-cultural communication. Therefore, in the process of teaching vocabulary, teachers should consciously explain the comparison between Chinese

and Western cultures so that students can understand the differences between different cultural practices in terms of the cultural connotation of vocabulary. For example, the colors, animals, and some numbers mentioned above have different connotative meanings in the process of Chinese and Western language usage. When teachers teach these vocabularies, they can make comparisons to make students understand the connotation of vocabularies in different cultural contexts, develop their cultural sensitivity and enhance cross-cultural communication skills.

## 5. Conclusion

Vocabulary is crucial to students' language learning, and whether vocabulary is used appropriately or not will directly affect the effect of intercultural communication. By exploring the different meanings of vocabulary, mainly conceptual, connotative, collocative and affective meanings, this paper emphasizes the enhancement of students' intercultural communicative awareness and competence by focusing on different meanings of vocabulary, by explaining the background cultural knowledge behind vocabulary, and by comparing different cultures embedded in vocabulary. The ability to use appropriate vocabulary to successfully communicate across cultures in different situations is not only one of the goals of intercultural communication but also the significance of vocabulary teaching.

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