

College English Teaching for Chinese Cultural International Communication

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Abstract

In the context of China's growing global engagement, college English teaching carries a dual responsibility: developing students' foreign language proficiency and cultivating their ability to communicate Chinese culture effectively to international audiences. However, many courses still focus predominantly on target-language cultures, resulting in a notable "Chinese culture aphasia" among students--the inability to express native cultural content in English. This paper explores practical strategies to integrate Chinese cultural content into college English instruction, aiming to enhance students' intercultural communicative competence and their capacity as cultural exchange envoys. Drawing on theories of intercultural communication and cultural confidence, the paper proposes five interconnected strategies: curriculum redesign with systematic Chinese cultural themes; pedagogical innovation through comparative and project-based approaches; teacher development as cultural mediators; leveraging digital resources for cultural production; assessment systems that value cultural output. The paper argues that these strategies, when implemented cohesively, can transform college English from a language skills course into a vital platform for China's cultural international engagement.

Keywords

College English Teaching; Chinese Culture; International Communication; Cultural Confidence; Strategies

1. Introduction

For decades, college English teaching in China has primarily aimed at improving students' general English proficiency and introducing them to Western cultures. Textbooks, teaching materials, and assessment systems have largely been designed around the cultural contexts of English-speaking countries. While this approach has successfully enhanced students' receptive skills and cultural awareness of the target language, it has inadvertently created a significant gap: most Chinese university students find themselves unable to articulate their own cultural heritage, values, and contemporary social realities in English. This phenomenon, termed "Chinese

culture aphasia”by many scholars, represents a serious deficiency in intercultural communication competence, as true intercultural exchange requires the ability not only to understand others but also to present one’s own culture effectively.

The Chinese government has repeatedly emphasized the importance of cultural confidence and the need to tell China’s stories well. In higher education, the Ministry of Education has called for integrating Chinese cultural education into all disciplines, including foreign language teaching. College English, as a compulsory course taken by millions of students nationwide, occupies a uniquely strategic position in this endeavour. It offers a natural venue for students to practice expressing Chinese cultural concepts, historical narratives, and contemporary achievements in English, thus preparing them to act as cultural mediators in international contexts.

Despite policy encouragement and scholarly advocacy, the integration of Chinese cultural content into college English remains sporadic, unsystematic, and often dependent on individual teachers’ initiatives. There is a pressing need for a coherent set of practical strategies that can guide curriculum designers, teachers, and institutions in transforming college English into an effective vehicle for cultural international communication. This paper aims to address that need by proposing five concrete, interconnected pathways grounded in both theory and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Culture Teaching in Foreign Language Education

The relationship between language and culture has long been recognized in applied linguistics. Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) positions cultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes as essential components of language education. Traditionally, however, culture teaching in EFL contexts has leaned heavily toward the target culture, often assuming that understanding the native speakers’ way of life is the primary goal. This tendency has been challenged by scholars who advocate for a more balanced, intercultural approach that values both the learners’ own culture and the target culture (Baker, 2015; Risager, 2006). The concept of “glocal”(global + local) language education suggests that learners should be equipped to mediate between their local cultural identities and global discourses.

2.2. Chinese Culture Aphasia in College English

The term “Chinese culture aphasia” was first coined in the early 2000s to describe the inability of Chinese English learners to express Chinese cultural knowledge in English (Cong, 2000). Numerous empirical studies have confirmed this phenomenon: university students often struggle to translate common Chinese terms, explain traditional customs, or discuss contemporary social issues in English (Zhang & Su, 2019; Liu & Liu, 2021). Surveys indicate that students generally possess positive attitudes toward learning about their own culture, but they lack both the vocabulary

and the practice opportunities in English classrooms (Wang & Guo, 2020). Textbooks have been criticized for containing too little Chinese cultural content and for presenting it in fragmented, superficial ways (Chen, 2022).

2.3. Policy and Pedagogical Efforts

In recent years, the Chinese government has issued several documents urging the integration of cultural education into foreign language teaching. The National Standards for College English Teaching (2020) explicitly states that college English should “enhance students’ cultural self-confidence and their ability to introduce Chinese culture to the world.” In response, some textbook publishers have begun adding Chinese cultural sections, and a growing number of teachers have experimented with comparative cultural tasks. Yet these efforts remain isolated and lack systematic coherence. Research has called for a holistic approach involving curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment reform (Xu & Fan, 2022). However, concrete, actionable pathways that can be adopted by different institutions are still scarce.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a three-pronged theoretical foundation to support the proposed strategies.

3.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Byram’s (1997) ICC model emphasizes that a competent intercultural speaker must possess knowledge of both their own and other cultures, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, critical cultural awareness, and attitudes of openness and curiosity. This framework explicitly values the learner’s ability to present their own culture, which is often underemphasized in practice. In our context, ICC provides a goal: students should be able to act as cultural informants, explaining Chinese cultural practices, beliefs, and values in a way that is understandable and engaging to international audiences.

3.2. Cultural Confidence and Cultural Subjectivity

The concept of cultural confidence has been prominent in Chinese policy discourse. In education, it translates to fostering students’ positive identification with their cultural heritage and their willingness to share it with others. Building on this, cultural subjectivity refers to the learner’s sense of being a legitimate agent of cultural expression, not merely a passive receiver of foreign norms. College English, if designed carefully, can strengthen this subjectivity by giving students the linguistic tools and the platform to voice their own cultural perspectives in English.

3.3. Task-Based and Project-Based Learning

Pedagogically, this paper draws on task-based (TBLT) and project-based learning (PBL) approaches. These learner-centred methods emphasize authentic tasks, meaningful communication, and the production of tangible outcomes. They are particularly suitable for cultural communication because they allow students to research, create, and present cultural content in engaging ways. Project-based tasks such as producing a video introducing a local tradition, writing a blog post about Chinese festivals, or organizing a cross-cultural virtual exchange simulate real-world communication and motivate students to use English purposefully.

By combining these theoretical lenses, the paper frames cultural communication not as an add-on to language teaching but as a central, integrated objective that enriches both language proficiency and intercultural competence.

4. Pathways to Enhance Chinese Cultural Communication

This section proposes five concrete and interrelated pathways that can be implemented at the institutional, departmental, and classroom levels.

4.1. Curriculum Redesign with Systematic Chinese Cultural Content

The first and most fundamental pathway is to systematically embed Chinese cultural content into the college English curriculum. Currently, most courses follow a linear progression from general English to academic English, with culture often treated as peripheral. A redesigned curriculum would incorporate Chinese cultural themes throughout all levels.

Practical steps can be shown in details. Develop thematic units centred on Chinese cultural topics, such as traditional festivals, philosophical traditions (Confucianism, Daoism), Chinese cuisine, martial arts, traditional medicine, modern technological achievements, and social changes. Integrate cultural content into skills courses: In reading, use passages about Chinese cultural heritage; in listening, include talks and podcasts by Chinese scholars speaking English; in speaking, design discussion topics like “How would you explain the Chinese concept of ‘harmony’ to an international friend?”; in writing, assign essays that compare Chinese and Western values. Create dedicated cultural modules within each semester, where students study a particular aspect of Chinese culture in depth and prepare presentations or reports in English. Example: A module on “Chinese Traditional Festivals” could include reading about the origins of the Spring Festival, listening to an interview about family reunion customs, vocabulary building for festival-related terms, and a final oral presentation where each student introduces a local festival custom.

4.2. Pedagogical Innovation through Comparative and Project-Based Approaches

The second pathway focuses on how teachers deliver content. Traditional lecture-based instruction is insufficient for developing cultural communication skills.

Instead, teachers should adopt interactive, student-centred methods that actively engage learners in cultural discovery and expression.

Comparative approaches encourage students to examine similarities and differences between Chinese and other cultures. This not only deepens understanding but also develops critical thinking and intercultural sensitivity. For example, students could compare the concept of “filial piety” in Chinese culture with care for the elderly in Western societies, discussing linguistic and cultural nuances in expressing these values.

Project-based approaches are particularly powerful. Students can work in groups on projects that require them to create cultural products in English. Possible projects include: producing a short documentary about a local intangible cultural heritage site; designing a bilingual brochure for a Chinese cultural attraction; creating a podcast series introducing Chinese customs to international listeners; conducting an interview with a foreigner about their perceptions of Chinese culture and then presenting a response.

These projects provide authentic audiences and purposes, making language use more meaningful and memorable. They also foster collaboration, research skills, and creativity.

Example: In a semester-long project, groups of students choose a Chinese cultural topic, research it using both Chinese and English sources, create a digital presentation (e.g., a video with English narration), and present it to the class, followed by peer feedback and discussion.

4.3. Teacher Development as Culture Mediators

Positioning Teachers are the key agents in implementing any educational change. Yet many college English teachers themselves lack training in teaching Chinese cultural content or in facilitating intercultural dialogue. The third pathway, therefore, addresses teacher professional development.

There are several aspects of teacher development concerned. Cultural knowledge enhancement: institutions should provide workshops, lectures, and study materials to deepen teachers’ own understanding of Chinese culture, including traditional and contemporary aspects, as well as the ability to explain them accurately in English. Pedagogical skills training: Teachers need hands-on guidance on how to design cultural tasks, facilitate comparative discussions, and assess cultural communicative competence. Demonstration classes and peer observation can be useful. Teacher collaboration: encourage cross-departmental collaboration between English teachers and specialists in Chinese culture, history, or philosophy. Co-teaching or team planning can enrich course content and ensure accuracy. Teacher as cultural mediator: teachers should model the role of a cultural mediator, showing curiosity, openness, and critical thinking when discussing cultural issues. They should also be aware of potential stereotypes and promote nuanced, respectful discourse. Example:

a series of professional development seminars could cover topics like “Teaching Traditional Chinese Philosophy in English,” “Handling Controversial Cultural Topics in Class,” and “Using Digital Tools for Cultural Presentation.”

4.4. Leveraging Digital Resources and Platforms

The digital age offers unprecedented opportunities for cultural communication. The fourth pathway encourages the strategic use of digital resources to expand the reach and authenticity of students’ cultural work.

Digital tools and strategies are as follows. Use online cultural resources: websites like China Daily Culture, Cultural China, and various museums’ virtual tours provide authentic English-language materials about Chinese culture. These can serve as reading, listening, and research materials. Social media and blogging: Encourage students to create blogs, WeChat official accounts, or Rednote in English about aspects of Chinese culture they are passionate about. This gives them a real audience and develops digital literacy. Video creation and sharing: Tools like iMovie, Adobe Spark, and TikTok allow students to produce short videos. Platforms like Bilibili or YouTube (with proper access) can host their works for global viewing. Virtual exchanges: Partner with foreign universities for virtual exchange programs where Chinese students discuss cultural topics with international peers. This provides authentic intercultural practice and immediate feedback. AI-powered language tools: AI writing assistants and translation tools can help students polish their English expression, but teachers should guide them to maintain their own voice and cultural authenticity. Example: a group of students creates a bilingual (Chinese-English) video blog series on “Hidden Gems of Chinese Local Culture,” featuring local foods, crafts, and traditions, and shares it on social media. They track engagement and respond to comments from international viewers.

4.5. Assessment Systems that Value Cultural Output

The final pathway addresses the often-neglected area of assessment. If cultural communication is not tested, students and teachers will give it low priority. Therefore, assessment systems should be reformed to explicitly include cultural knowledge and expression.

Assessment innovations include Chinese cultural content in exams: teachers add questions that require students to read about Chinese cultural topics or produce written texts explaining cultural concepts. Assess oral cultural presentations: use rubrics that evaluate not only language accuracy but also depth of cultural content, clarity of explanation, and intercultural sensitivity. Portfolio assessment: encourage students to compile a portfolio of their cultural projects (videos, essays, blogs) throughout the semester. This demonstrates growth and provides a holistic view of their communicative competence. Self and peer assessment: involve students in evaluating their own and peers’ cultural communication skills, fostering reflective

practice and critical awareness. Formative feedback: Provide continuous feedback during project work, focusing on both language and cultural content, so students can improve. Example: an oral test might ask students to randomly pick a Chinese cultural topic (e.g., “the significance of the colour red in Chinese culture”) and deliver a two-minute impromptu speech in English, assessed for content, language, and delivery.

5. Discussion and Implementation Considerations

The five strategies outlined above are not isolated measures; they are mutually reinforcing and should be implemented as an integrated system. Curriculum redesign provides the content foundation upon which all other strategies depend. Without systematic cultural content in the syllabus, pedagogical innovation lacks direction, and project-based tasks would have no substantive cultural material to draw upon. Conversely, without innovative teaching methods, even the most thoughtfully designed curriculum remains inert, failing to engage students actively with cultural content. Teacher development serves as the human infrastructure that ensures both curriculum and pedagogy are delivered effectively; a well-designed curriculum can fail if teachers lack the confidence or competence to implement it. Digital resources amplify and extend the reach of cultural communication, while assessment reform provides the accountability mechanism that motivates both teachers and students to take cultural content seriously. This interconnectedness suggests that piecemeal implementation—adopting only one or two strategies while neglecting others—is unlikely to produce significant improvements. Institutions should therefore adopt a holistic approach, recognizing that sustainable change requires coordinated action across all five dimensions.

A critical implementation consideration is the differential starting point of various institutions and student populations. Research-intensive universities with well-resourced language centers may be able to implement all five strategies simultaneously, while less-resourced institutions may need to adopt a phased approach. For institutions with limited capacity, a reasonable sequence might begin with curriculum redesign as the fundamental step, followed by targeted pedagogical innovations in a few pilot courses, then gradually expand to include teacher development and digital resource integration, with assessment reform introduced once the other strategies are sufficiently established. Such a phased approach allows institutions to build momentum, learn from early experiences, and adjust strategies based on local conditions.

Potential barriers to implementation should be acknowledged frankly. First, many college English teachers received their own education in a system that emphasized linguistic accuracy over cultural content, and they may feel underprepared to teach Chinese cultural topics in English. This is not a reflection of individual inadequacy but a systemic gap in pre-service and in-service teacher education. Addressing this

barrier requires sustained investment in professional development, including workshops, mentoring, and collaborative curriculum planning. Second, the dominance of standardized testing—particularly the CET-4 and CET-6 examinations—creates a powerful backwash effect. Teachers and students naturally prioritize what is tested, and if cultural communication competence is not assessed, it will inevitably be marginalized. Reforming assessment systems requires not only institutional commitment but also engagement with national testing authorities, which presents a longer-term challenge. Third, developing high-quality teaching materials that integrate Chinese cultural content in an engaging and pedagogically sound manner requires time, expertise, and resources that many institutions lack. Collaborative material development across institutions, or the adoption of existing innovative textbooks, can mitigate this difficulty.

The proposed framework also engages with the existing literature in several ways. While previous studies have identified similar individual strategies—such as curriculum reform or project-based learning—few have articulated a comprehensive, theory-grounded system that explicitly links all five dimensions. Moreover, much of the existing research has focused on cultural content integration in isolation from assessment and teacher development, treating each as separate concerns. The present framework contributes by foregrounding their interdependence and by providing concrete, actionable guidance for each strategy. Furthermore, while cultural confidence and intercultural competence have been discussed extensively in theory, this framework translates these abstract concepts into operational pedagogical practices, thereby bridging the gap between policy discourse and classroom reality.

Another important consideration is the sustainability of these strategies over time. Many educational innovations are introduced with great enthusiasm but fade after the initial impetus diminishes. To ensure long-term sustainability, institutions should embed cultural communication objectives into their regular curriculum review cycles, establish dedicated funding for resource development, and create institutional structures—such as teaching committees or research groups—that maintain momentum beyond individual champions. Additionally, building partnerships with other institutions, both domestic and international, can sustain motivation through shared goals and peer accountability.

Finally, the student perspective deserves attention. While the strategies are designed by educators, their success ultimately depends on students' engagement and perception of relevance. Institutions should involve students in the design and evaluation of cultural communication tasks, soliciting feedback on what topics interest them, what formats they find motivating, and what challenges they encounter. When students perceive cultural communication as meaningful to their personal and professional development—rather than as an additional requirement imposed on them—their intrinsic motivation increases, leading to deeper learning

outcomes. This aligns with the student-centred philosophy underlying the pedagogical innovations proposed in this paper.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that college English teaching can and should play a pivotal role in enhancing China's cultural international communication capability. By moving beyond the traditional focus on target-language cultures and adopting a balanced intercultural approach, college English can equip students with the linguistic tools, cultural knowledge, and communicative confidence to act as effective cultural ambassadors.

The five pathways--curriculum redesign, pedagogical innovation, teacher development, digital leveraging, and assessment reform--offer a coherent and practical framework for transformation. They are grounded in established theory, supported by empirical evidence, and adaptable to various institutional contexts. Implementing these pathways requires commitment, creativity, and collaboration, but the potential rewards are substantial: a generation of Chinese graduates who not only speak English well but can also explain their culture with clarity and pride, thus contributing to a more nuanced and mutual understanding in the global community.

Future research should examine the outcomes of such integrated programmes through longitudinal studies, comparing students' cultural communication competence before and after exposure. Additionally, studies exploring effective partnerships with foreign institutions, the role of artificial intelligence in cultural translation, and the development of standardized assessment tools for cultural output would further advance this field. Ultimately, the goal is to transform college English from a mere language course into a meaningful bridge for cultural dialogue --a bridge that connects China to the world, one student at a time.

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