

An Exploration of Cultural Teaching Strategies of High School English From Activity-Based Learning Theory

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With the development of globalization and the emergence of English as a lingua franca, China's English curriculum standards of general high school propose "cultural awareness" as one of the core competencies, aiming to cultivate socialist builders and successors with Chinese sentiment, international vision, and intercultural communication skills. However, how to effectively practice cultural teaching and cultivate students' cultural awareness in high school is affected by many factors, such as the overemphasis on linguistic knowledge rather than cultural knowledge. This paper explores strategies for high school English cultural teaching through the lens of English learning activity theory, aiming to offer front-line teachers innovative teaching concepts and methods to enhance the effectiveness of cultural teaching.

Keywords: English learning activity theory, high school English, cultural teaching, teaching strategy

Importance of English Cultural Teaching in High School

The ability of transmitting indigenous cultures in English has become a developmental necessity for all countries as a result of economic globalization, which has made English a universal language. *The General High School English Curriculum Standards* (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision) (hereinafter referred to as *The New Curriculum*) includes "cultural awareness" in the core competencies of the English subject, which refers to the understanding of Chinese and foreign cultures and is the intercultural cognition, attitude, and behavioural orientation shown by students in the context of globalization. It helps students enhance national identity and homeland sentiment, strengthen cultural confidence, establish a sense of shared human destiny, and develop into civilized and socially responsible individuals (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

However, in front-line classrooms, how to effectively carry out cultural teaching and cultivate students' cultural awareness is affected by many factors, such as the lack of appropriate cultural literacy of teachers, overemphasis on language knowledge rather than cultural knowledge, monotonous teaching methods, and a lack of holistic teaching of cultural knowledge (Liu, 2020; Zhang, 2022). Zhang Cewen (2019) stressed that the key to cultivating students' cultural awareness lies in the dual role of in-class infiltration and out-of-class inculcation. Teachers need to be conscious of cultural teaching and learning, deeply explore the cultural elements contained in the teaching materials, and organize classroom cultural exploratory activities so as to guide students to build up their cultural values, which will lead to their cultural self-awareness and appropriate cultural behaviour patterns.

Therefore, this essay will concentrate on the group of high school English teachers and explore how they can successfully implement cultural teaching to raise students' cultural awareness from the standpoint of the English learning activity theory.

The Theoretical Basis for Implementing Cultural Teaching Through English Learning Activity Theory

The New Curriculum proposes the “English learning activity theory”, making it clear that “activity” is the basic form of organization of English class and an effective way to cultivate the core competencies of the subject. It refers to the theme-meaning-oriented learning method. Students are guided by teachers to analyse and solve problems through a series of comprehensive English learning activities (including learning and understanding, application and practice, and transfer and innovation) to promote their own language knowledge, language skills development, cultural understanding, diversified thinking, value judgement, and learning strategies. From the perspective of teachers, they should insist on being student-centred and design relevant learning activities based on the meaning of the theme and the content of the discourse, so as to promote the achievement of the students' learning objectives. At the same time, *The New Curriculum* proposes teaching instructions for “cultural teaching”, stressing that

teachers should create meaningful contexts based on the discourse and make appropriate use of information technology to guide students to explore the meanings and connotations of cultural knowledge, and help students learn and internalize language knowledge and cultural knowledge in various activities of language practice and application. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020, p. 34)

Obviously, there are many commonalities between the English learning activity theory and cultural teaching. First, both emphasize the role of “theme-leading”, that is to say, learning under the guidance of thematic meanings will help students understand and master language and cultural knowledge in a specific cultural context, so that they can understand and experience culture in a deeper way. Second, both emphasize the full use of discourse, namely teachers teach culture on the basis of the cultural knowledge carried in the discourse, guide students to understand and experience culture through the discourse, and help them transfer and apply it. Third, both emphasize the importance of helping students internalize cultural knowledge into cognition, behavior, and character with correct values through a variety of English practice activities at different levels.

Admittedly, English learning activity theory provides comprehensive and in-depth methodological support for the implementation of cultural teaching and learning, which helps students develop comprehensive cultural understanding and cultural self-confidence along with language learning.

Cultural Teaching Strategies Based on the English Learning Activity Theory

The theory of English learning activities gives a fresh approach to the current situation of separating language instruction from culture teaching. Teachers should follow the theme-led and discourse-based principles, thoroughly extract the discourse's cultural elements, make clear the goals of cultural teaching, and create comprehensive, relevant, and practical English learning activities.

Extracting Cultural Elements Based on Thematic Contexts

The New Curriculum states that “thematic contexts not only frame the scope of linguistic and cultural knowledge and provide a context for language learning, but also organically permeate emotions, attitudes and

values” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2020, p. 15). Teachers’ precise grasp of the meaning of the theme and effective guidance can influence students’ understanding of the discourse and the effect of language acquisition. Meanwhile, *The New Curriculum* points out that “discourse carries linguistic and cultural knowledge, conveys cultural connotations, values and ways of thinking, providing linguistic and cultural materials for students to develop language skills and form learning strategies” (p. 18). Admittedly, discourse plays an important role in the achievement of cultural teaching goals and the design of cultural teaching activities. So, teachers should analyze the discourse comprehensively and deeply based on the three major thematic contexts of “human and self, human and society, and human and nature” in order to extract the hidden cultural elements in discourses and lay a foundation for the design of teaching objectives and activities.

Combining the classification of cultural content designed by *The New Curriculum* and scholars at home and abroad (Moran, 2009; Zhang & Li, 2022), this paper defines the cultural elements in the textbook into the five categories: cultural products, cultural practices, cultural perspectives, cultural communities, and cultural persons. *High School English Selective Compulsory I of People’s Education Press* will be used as an example to analyze the cultural elements carried by the discourse in different thematic contexts (see Table 1).

Table 1

Analysis of Cultural Elements in Discourse

Unit	Thematic contexts	Discourse	Cultural elements
Unit 1 People of achievement	Human and society Human and self	“Tu Yoyo Awarded Nobel Prize” This article help students comprehend the process of finding artemisinin to treat malaria, appreciate the achievements of Tu Yoyo and her team, as well as the value of traditional Chinese medicine in improving human health.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural product: Artemisinin • Cultural perspective: The spirit and values behind the great achievements • Cultural person: Tu Yoyo
		“The Man Who Revolutionized Our Understanding of the Universe” This article describes Einstein’s outstanding achievements, outstanding contributions, and his life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural product: Relativity theory • Cultural perspective: The spirit of Einstein • Cultural person: Einstein
Unit 2 Looking into the future	Human and society	“Smart Homes to Make Life Easier” This article introduces the future smart home, aiming to help students understand the convenience that technological advancements can bring to their lives and encourages them to consider potential problems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural product: Smart home • Cultural perspective: Attitudes towards new technologies
Unit 3 Fascinating parks	Human and nature	“Sarek National Park—Europe’s Hidden Natural Treasure” The paper explores Salak National Park from the viewpoint of a solo hiker and discusses the lifestyle adaptations made by the Sami people to protect nature.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural product: Sarek National Park • Cultural practice: The modern lifestyle of the Sami people • Cultural perspective: Harmony between man and nature; spirits of challenge and adventure

Focusing on Specific Discourse and Designing Cultural Teaching Objectives

According to the cultural awareness cultivation objectives proposed in *The New Curriculum*, this paper further summarizes the cultural teaching objectives into three levels: the acquisition and interpretation of cultural knowledge, the comparison and refinement of cultural similarities and differences, and the shaping of values and the application of cultural self-confidence. This paper will take the discourse “Tu Yoyo Awarded Nobel Prize” as an example and design the cultural teaching objectives after extracting cultural elements (see Table 2).

Table 2

Analysis of the Objectives of Teaching Cultural Awareness in Discourse

Cultural pedagogical objectives	Discourse: “Tu Yoyo Awarded Nobel Prize”
Acquisition and interpretation of cultural knowledge	To learn about the main process of Tu Yoyo and her team in discovering and refining artemisinin to treat malaria, to analyse the reasons for their success, to understand their hardship and greatness, as well as the outstanding contribution and value of traditional Chinese medicine to human health and world development.
Comparison and refinement of cultural differences and similarities	Through the learning activities, analyse and refine the spiritual qualities and values shared by these figures in the context of other accomplished figures in the unit (e.g. Albert Einstein).
The shaping of values and the application of cultural confidence	Through the learning activities, students set up correct values and think about the direction of their future endeavors in comparison with their own growth experience and career planning.

Designing Learning Activities to Implement Cultural Teaching

Wang, Qian and Wu (2021) pointed out that learning and understanding activities focus on information acquisition, sorting and integration, constructing thematic knowledge structures, and laying the foundation for understanding language meaning and cultural values. Application and practice activities explore the deeper layers of language and culture and promote the transformation of knowledge into competence through cultural experience. Transfer and innovation activities use reasoning, criticism, and evaluation to solve problems creatively, express themselves rationally, embody correct values, and achieve the enhancement of competence to literacy. Therefore, when teachers carry out cultural teaching, they can achieve the cultural teaching goals by designing learning activities from shallow to deep. This paper will continue to take “Tu Yoyo Awarded Nobel Prize” as an example and design corresponding learning activities.

1. Learning and understanding activities: Acquiring and interpreting cultural knowledge:

Activity 1: Teacher-student Q&A to introduce the classroom and clarify the cultural teaching objectives:

The teacher arouses students’ interest by asking, “Who discovered a cure for malaria, and who changed the way we understand the universe?” The introduction of Tu Yoyo and Albert Einstein through this question can stimulate students’ interest in learning, and then, express students’ admiration for scientists and clarify the cultural teaching objectives.

Activity 2: Sort out scientific achievements with the help of mind maps:

Teachers lead students to read the text, use the mind map to sort out the process of Tu Yoyo’s discovery of artemisinin, and set the reading task “Tell the process of the discovery of artemisinin”. During the process, the teacher can encourage students to draw key points in the text, mark the key time and important discoveries, and let the students supplement the content of the mind map according to the existing information so as to obtain the explicit cultural achievement information embodied in the discourse.

Activity 3: Further interpret the text and explore the spirit of scientific research:

The teacher guides students to read carefully by asking, “What qualities do Tu Yoyo and her team show in the process of discovering artemisinin?” The teacher guides students to read carefully and find out the excellent qualities and research spirit (cautious, committed, persistent, team spirit, patient, etc.) of Tu Yoyo and her team members. Then, students will be guided to group discussion, sharing their comprehension towards the spirits and firm beliefs in scientific researchers.

Finally, the teacher summarizes the students' sharing and reiterates the cultural elements of the text. First, the scientific achievement of Tu Yoyo in discovering artemisinin and the spiritual qualities it demonstrates. Second, scientific research is not only the accumulation of scientific achievements but also the embodiment of scientists' personal beliefs and values.

2. Application and practice activities: Comparing and refining cultural similarities and differences:

Extension Activity 1: News interview of Nobel Prize Award Ceremony:

First of all, the teacher uses multimedia to play the video of the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Tu Yoyo and the video of the on-site interview. Then, the teacher guides the students to do role-playing, with students working in pairs, one playing the role of a news reporter and the other playing the role of other accomplished celebrities in this unit. The students will conduct interviews according to the interview template provided by the teacher. (e.g.: How did you react upon hearing the prize-winning news? How do you feel about your research? What was your greatest motivation behind this research? Has it inspired any new thoughts for your future research? What advice would you give to those who wish to contribute to the world through science?)

Extension Activity 2: Summarizing and sharing the cultural spirit of celebrities:

The teacher guides students to have group discussions based on the role-plays to compare and summarize the similarities and differences in the spiritual qualities in celebrities. This can help students realize that cultural learning requires not only the accumulation of knowledge but also an in-depth understanding of the spiritual connotations and the further internalization of good culture into personal consciousness and conduct.

3. Transfer and innovation activities: The shaping of values and the application of cultural self-confidence:

Extension Activity 3: Career planning career map design and sharing:

This activity aims to help students improve their expression and English application skills by designing an English career map, guiding students to combine the outstanding spiritual qualities they have learned with their personal career planning. First, the teacher guides students to choose one of the many spiritual qualities summarized in Extension Activity 2 as the theme of the career map, such as "perseverance", "creative thinking", and "teamwork". Then, the teacher guides students to think about how to reflect this quality in their personal career planning and to carry this quality through the process of career selection, goal setting, and practical action. At each stage, students need to clearly demonstrate the chosen quality to ensure that the career plan is highly consistent with their personal values. Finally, students share a short presentation based on their career plan career map. The sharing includes the influence of famous people and their good qualities on the individual, personal career vision, possible challenges and strategies to solve them, and the role of values in decision-making.

Through designing and sharing The Career Map, Students Will Not only integrate the values of celebrities with their personal career planning, but also plant the seeds of correct values deep inside their hearts and make clear the direction of their future endeavors. This activity is not only a practice of career planning but also a deep shaping of students' spiritual quality and social responsibility, guiding them to combine the realization of personal values with national rejuvenation.

Summary

Currently, there is a relative lack of research on cultural teaching strategies at the high school level. After understanding the connotation and characteristics of the English learning activity theory proposed by *the New Curriculum*, this study attempts to integrate it with cultural instruction in an organic way. Namely, English teachers should excavate the cultural elements in the high school English textbooks based on the thematic

contexts and discourse. And then, they ought to design the cultural teaching objectives as guidance to the following teaching activities. Finally, teachers need to design step-by-step learning activities to implement cultural teaching and promote the achievement of cultural objectives. In the future, more empirical research on classroom observation and classroom teaching can be carried out to obtain more authoritative and convincing data, explore more useful strategies for teaching English culture in high school, and form rich teaching cases that are worth promoting.

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