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ENHANCING CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE OF INTERNATIONALIZED STUDENTS IN CHINA: EXPERIENCE FROM SINO-FOREIGN COOPERATIVE UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization, increased contact between people from different cultural backgrounds necessitates the development of new competencies to communicate across linguistic and cultural differences. Cross-cultural competence has become a crucial skill. For students receiving higher education in China, curriculum and teaching methods are key to enhancing cross-cultural competence. This study examines how Sino-foreign cooperative universities promote students' cross-cultural competence development through curriculum design, teaching models, and teacher-student interactions.

KEYWORDS: *Internationalization at Home, Cross-Cultural Competence, Sino-Foreign Cooperative Universities*

1. INTRODUCTION

Global trends have fundamentally transformed society's economic, cultural, and political spheres. Higher education has also moved toward internationalization under this influence. Internationalization is one of the major forces shaping higher education development in the 21st century (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Educational internationalization has two dimensions: "internationalization at home" and "internationalization abroad". Since most students remain in their home country for higher education rather than studying abroad, internationalization often occurs at the domestic level, focusing on university campuses within the country by integrating international elements into curricula, programs, and extracurricular activities, emphasizing multicultural integration in teaching and learning processes (Knight, 2008). Internationalization at home creates a cross-cultural learning environment for students unable to study abroad. Through participation in internationalized courses and programs, students enhance their understanding of cultural differences and develop cross-cultural competence, acquiring skills similar to those gained by internationally mobile students (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Therefore, curriculum plays a vital role in domestic internationalization. In a cross-cultural learning environment, students improve their cross-cultural competence through coursework and interactions with students from different cultural backgrounds (Deardorff & Jones, 2012).

Sino-foreign cooperative universities refer to educational institutions jointly established by foreign and Chinese educational institutions within China, primarily serving Chinese citizens (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2003). These universities possess independent legal status and campuses, with high levels of domestic internationalization, providing students with a multicultural learning environment reflected in internationalized curriculum design, innovative educational models, international faculty, diverse student body, and rich, diverse academic resources.

Research on Sino-foreign cooperative universities has largely focused on government management and internal governance, with less attention paid to student learning aspects, particularly cross-cultural learning. This study aims to examine the cross-cultural education model in Sino-foreign cooperative universities, addressing the following research question: How do Sino-foreign cooperative universities promote students' cross-cultural competence through curriculum and teaching methods?

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2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Internationalization of Higher Education

Knight (2008) defines higher education internationalization as integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the purpose, functions, and teaching processes of higher education at institutional and national levels (p.21). Higher education internationalization has two aspects: "internationalization at home" and "internationalization abroad". The former focuses on domestic university curricula and cultivating students' cross-cultural competence, while the latter refers to cross-border mobility of people, programs, and institutions. These two aspects are interdependent rather than operating independently (Knight, 2008). De Wit et al. (2015) argue that both aspects relate to curriculum and aim to cultivate students' cross-cultural competence, making their distinction limited though widely used for ease of understanding. Beelen and Jones (2015) question Knight's perspective, suggesting that according to Knight's definition, internationalization abroad seemingly cannot develop students' cross-cultural competence.

To distinguish these differences more clearly and accurately, Beelen and Jones (2015) redefined internationalization at home as: purposefully integrating international and intercultural elements into the formal and informal curriculum for all students in domestic learning environments (p.69). The "domestic learning environment" mentioned in this definition includes formal school learning environments and broader community learning environments. One prerequisite is that student learning outcomes in the learning environment must be articulated and evaluated; otherwise, it does not qualify as the "learning environment" mentioned in the definition. The definition also emphasizes that curriculum internationalization is a "purposeful" integration process, rejecting "casual" or "random" approaches, and emphasizes "all students", meaning domestic internationalization must cover every student. Consequently, "internationalization at home" benefits a broader group, creating cross-cultural learning opportunities for many students who cannot study abroad, allowing them to gain employment skills similar to internationally mobile students through curriculum internationalization (Beelen & Jones, 2015).

2.2 Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education

Sino-foreign cooperative education can be traced back to the late 1970s and early 1980s. After China's economic system reform and transition from planned to market economy, the country's development achieved notable results, gradually revealing its potential as a superpower. At this time, China's higher education market began attracting attention from developed countries (Garrett, 2003). Chinese higher education institutions began partnering with foreign institutions for language training and cultural exchange activities. In January 1995, the State Education Commission (later renamed Ministry of Education) issued the *Provisional Regulations on Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education* (hereinafter referred to as *Provisional Regulations*), China's first official policy on cooperative education. The *Provisional Regulations*, as the first official guideline, led Sino-foreign cooperative education into a "more structured, systematic, and standardized phase" (Huang, 2003, p.198).

As the domestic education market gradually opened up, more comprehensive regulations and policies were needed to support and encourage cooperative education. In 2003, the State Council issued the *Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education* (hereinafter referred to as *Regulations*), replacing the *Provisional Regulations*. The *Regulations* represent China's highest-level current cooperative education legislation, significantly elevating the status of cooperative education. Today, China is one of the largest importers of transnational education, and the government continues to encourage high-quality Sino-foreign cooperative education, viewing it as strategic support for further educational opening up (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2003).

2.3 Terminology Related to Cross-Cultural Competence

In cross-cultural competence research, there is no consensus on terminology usage, with different academic fields employing various terms and definitions (Deardorff & Jones, 2012; Fantini, 2009; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). For example, the social work field typically uses "cross-cultural competence", while mechanical engineering uses "global competence" (Deardorff & Jones, 2012). Other cross-cultural competence terminology includes intercultural communication competence, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, cultural fluency, and cultural literacy (Fantini, 2009).

The term "intercultural competence" has gained increasing attention, referring to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately integrate with various cultural contexts in cross-cultural situations (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Intercultural competence does not require individuals to abandon their original culture or adopt other cultures but encourages them to maintain openness and curiosity toward other cultures, enabling effective interaction and

cooperation amid cultural differences (Barrett et al., 2014). It acknowledges both an individual's original communicative competence (CC1) and the second competence gained through cross-cultural communication (CC2), recognizing that profound insights can emerge from comparing these competencies. Fantini (2009, p.458) describes this process as:

Communicative Competence1 + Communicative Competence2 (+ CC3, 4, etc.) ⇒ Intercultural Communicative Competence

Fantini (2009) argues that recognizing and comparing these two communicative competencies is the advantage of the term "intercultural competence", something unattainable in monolingual and monocultural contexts. Literature also commonly uses "intercultural competence", with Deardorff and Jones (2012) noting that this term applies not only to foreign contexts but to all intercultural situations.

2.4 Cross-Cultural Competence Models

The development of cross-cultural competence is a longitudinal, continuous process that deepens over time but may also stagnate or regress (Fantini, 2009). Cross-cultural competence is measured by whether individuals can appropriately and effectively modify their behavior to adapt to new cultures during cultural transitions (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). Academia has produced extensive research on assessing and describing cross-cultural competence. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) reviewed different scholars' cross-cultural competence models and categorized them into four types based on potential similarities: compositional models, co-orientational models, developmental models, adaptive models, and causal process models. These cross-cultural competence models are proposed based on specific fields.

Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity was proposed in 1986, based on constructivism, hypothesizing that the more complex cultural differences individuals experience, the faster their cross-cultural competence improves. This model divides individuals' attitudes toward cultural differences in cross-cultural contexts into two stages and six orientations. The first stage is ethnocentrism, with three orientations: denial, defense, and minimization; the second stage is ethnorelativism, with acceptance, adaptation, and integration orientations. Bennett considers knowledge, attitudes, and behavior as the three most important elements of cross-cultural competence, which must work together to promote cross-cultural competence development (Bennett & Bennett, 2004).

2.5 Cultivation of Cross-Cultural Competence

Developing students' cross-cultural competence is one of the objectives of higher education (Barrett et al., 2014). Cross-cultural competence development occurs through curriculum and interactions with students from different cultural backgrounds (Deardorff & Jones, 2012). Cultural education is crucial for enhancing cross-cultural competence. Curricula can more systematically enhance cross-cultural competence, and selecting language courses and cross-cultural content or themed courses contributes to cross-cultural competence development (Zlomislić et al., 2016). Teachers can foster students' cross-cultural competence by teaching within a cross-cultural dialogue framework, establishing a supportive learning environment, aligning courses and assessments with student needs, and guiding student reflection (Wang, 2016). Additionally, providing training to students before entering cross-cultural contexts can help them successfully integrate into another culture (Khafaji, 2018; Sit et al., 2017).

Certainly, developing cross-cultural competence extends beyond the classroom through extracurricular activities (OECD, 2018). International branch campuses should encourage students to value cross-cultural competence development, actively participate in experiences, exploration, and challenges, and learn to analyze, compare, reflect, and cooperate within another culture (Barrett et al., 2014). Some scholars believe that experiential learning in cross-cultural environments is more valuable than learning itself (Chalid, 2014). Learning through cross-cultural experiences and reflecting on one's own culture develops cultural self-awareness and enhances intercultural sensitivity.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

This study employs qualitative research methodology, characterized by two features: research is conducted through the researcher as a research pathway, and the research aims to deeply understand aspects of the social world (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Data sources include various documents and in-depth interviews. Selected documents include policy documents, annual summaries, self-evaluation reports, brochures, publications, and websites from both universities. In-depth interviews used semi-structured interview methods, with interview guidelines developed based on research content.

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This study selected University A and University B as case studies. Both are Sino-foreign cooperative universities with independent legal status, mature development, and good reputation and prestige in China. Researchers actively contacted case study schools, seeking students, teachers, and administrative staff willing to be interviewed, then used snowball sampling to identify subsequent interviewees until data saturation was reached. This study interviewed 21 students from both schools through face-to-face and online interviews. To protect interviewee confidentiality, all interviewees are coded, with "AS" representing University A students and "BS" representing University B students.
This study used interview guidelines as research tools, developing student interview guidelines focusing on curriculum, teaching, and extracurricular activities in Sino-foreign cooperative universities. Researchers used NVivo software as a research data analysis auxiliary tool. Researchers first read through texts to understand main content, established themes based on research objectives, then used NVivo for semi-open coding of text data, categorized descriptions of similar themes from different texts, and finally conducted in-depth interpretation of categorized data to form research results and conclusions.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Language Courses Offered

Both universities offer language courses in the first academic year, aiming to create an English-learning environment and develop students' academic English abilities and professional learning skills. University A's language courses are managed by the English Language Teaching Center. First-year students study "Academic Reading and Writing" and "Oral Communication Skills" in their first semester, followed by "English in Specific Academic Contexts A: Humanities/Science" and "Oral Communication Skills" in their second semester. The curriculum progresses systematically, with first-year studies focusing on using English for academic reading, writing, and communication. University B's English for Academic Purposes program provides two years of profession-oriented instruction, with the first year helping students quickly adapt to an all-English teaching environment and the second year advancing their listening, speaking, reading, writing abilities, and English application in various professional disciplines.

Academic English courses are conducted in small classes, allowing teachers to address individual student needs, provide detailed, personalized guidance, and facilitate more teacher-student interaction. Teachers guide and encourage student discussion through group work and direct academic paper writing instruction, from basic requirements to literature reading, topic selection, argumentation, and composition. After students complete learning tasks, teachers provide timely specific feedback (AS2, AS7, AS10, BS2, BS3), identifying areas for improvement and suggesting enhancement directions, helping improve student learning outcomes. Most interviewees indicated that academic English courses enhanced their reading, speaking, and writing abilities while establishing foundations for their professional studies.

"In academic English courses, teachers organize discussions, ask for our thoughts, and encourage us to express ourselves. This trains both our language expression ability and English speaking skills. Oral and writing courses have greatly helped my learning in other subjects" (AS7).

Language and cultural courses both contribute to students' cross-cultural competence development (Zlomislić et al., 2016). Interviewees from science and engineering reported that professional courses primarily focus on specialized knowledge with limited exposure to other cultures, while humanities students indicated they learn about other cultures through professional studies. Language courses can improve students' language proficiency, preventing limited thinking ability when in another culture (Fantini, 2009), but don't necessarily enhance cross-cultural competence. Research shows individuals may possess advanced second language abilities while their cross-cultural competence remains far behind or shows no significant improvement (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Jackson, 2011). Enhancing cross-cultural competence requires additional elements beyond language. The ideal state combines advanced language abilities and skills with factors like knowledge and attitudes (Deardorff & Jones, 2012).

4.2 "Tutorial System", "Office Hours", and Email as Primary Channels for Cross-Cultural Communication Between Teachers and Students

During course progression, student-teacher interactions primarily focus on academic matters, generally avoiding personal communication. As interviewee AS7 stated, "During classes, students and teachers must maintain a certain distance", though this restriction doesn't apply after course completion. Generally, students engage in cross-cultural communication with teachers through two channels, one being interaction with personal tutors. The institution assigns each student a personal tutor, requiring a minimum number of consultations per semester. Personal tutors use these

opportunities to listen to students, understand their academic and life situations, and provide comfort and advice, typically avoiding academic matters.

"Our university requires meeting with PT (personal tutor) several times. PT needs to understand your current situation, including your study and life circumstances, determine if you need help, or identify ways they can assist you - it's like having a small communication session" (AS2).

University B interviewees indicated that post-class student-teacher interactions occur through email and office hours. Students choose their preferred method of teacher contact. Interviewee BS6 expressed feeling comfortable using email to communicate with teachers, as it allows clearer expression of questions and separation of academic and personal matters. Interviewee BS9 preferred one-on-one communication during office hours.

In cross-cultural education contexts, a supportive learning environment is considered crucial for promoting students' cross-cultural competence development (Wang, 2016). Such environments provide inclusive spaces where students can freely express their views while learning to understand and respect peers from different cultural backgrounds (Deardorff, 2006). The "tutorial system" and "office hours" as primary channels for cross-cultural communication between teachers and students in Sino-foreign cooperative universities exemplify this supportive learning environment.

4.3 Limited but Positive Cross-Cultural Communication Opportunities Between Chinese and International Students

Most interviewees reported limited cross-cultural interaction experiences with few cultural conflicts, thus not requiring changes in their perspectives or behaviors. The lack of cross-cultural communication opportunities stems from three factors. First, student-teacher extracurricular interactions primarily focus on academic discussions, rarely extending to other topics. Second, opportunities for contact with international students are limited, with some interviewees noting that interactions with international classmates occur only during classroom discussions and cooperation, with virtually no extracurricular communication (BS1). Third, international faculty and students undergo "Sinicization" and "group isolation". For them, China represents a genuine cross-cultural environment. Living and studying here, they attempt to integrate into this environment, inevitably becoming "Sinicized". When communicating with local students, they use Chinese or adopt Chinese behavioral patterns. Interviewees AS1, AS2, AS3, and BS9 mentioned this phenomenon, expressing surprise at how quickly international faculty and students integrate into Chinese culture. BS3 indicated that international students typically socialize within their groups, while BS10 noted that international students seem less enthusiastic about integrating into Chinese student circles.

When individuals communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, they adjust or change their perspectives or behaviors if they feel uncomfortable, to facilitate more effective communication. Some interviewees had cross-cultural communication experiences in classroom settings or club activities. According to interviewee responses, interactions with international classmates involved a process of mutual understanding and adjustment, including aspects of language, religious customs, and behavioral patterns.

The process of mutual understanding and adjustment may involve uncertainty, misunderstanding, or even discomfort, but interviewees reported positive insights from these experiences. Interviewee AS5 noted that group collaboration with international students wasn't initially smooth due to significant cultural differences and varying thinking patterns, but both parties gradually adapted through continuous communication and interaction. Interviewee BS11 mentioned initial fears of interaction with international classmates due to poor oral English skills, worrying about causing misunderstandings or offense. After experiencing collaboration, these communication fears dissipated, and they recognized international classmates' strengths during the cooperative process.

Cross-cultural competence enhancement in learning contexts includes both informal learning and formal education. Barrett (2014) suggests that in informal learning contexts, individuals enhance cross-cultural competence through self-directed actions or communication with others, making this learning spontaneous and unpredictable. Formal education occurs within school settings through implemented teaching plans, courses, lectures, and seminars. Students at Sino-foreign cooperative universities primarily interact with international classmates through classroom discussions and collaboration, also experiencing informal learning processes that often occur in personal life contexts rather than formal academic environments.

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5. RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Strengthen Integration of Cross-Cultural Curriculum and Teaching Methods

Language courses form the foundation for students' cross-cultural competence enhancement. Higher education institutions should further strengthen the integration of cross-cultural elements with curriculum content, including language skills training and multidimensional capability development covering cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication skills. Teachers can employ interactive teaching methods such as project-based learning, role-playing, and case analysis to promote students' practical application of cross-cultural knowledge and enhance their cross-cultural communication abilities.

5.2 Optimize Informal Learning Environments

Informal learning represents a primary form of students' cross-cultural competence development. Therefore, educational institutions should create more informal learning opportunities, such as international cultural festivals, student exchange programs, and language corners, to promote students' cross-cultural competence enhancement through natural social interactions. Meanwhile, encourage student participation in club activities and volunteer services, which provide platforms for practicing cross-cultural communication and strengthen students' adaptability and flexibility. Educational institutions can implement measures to promote exchange and cooperation between Chinese and international students. For example, establishing "partner programs" allowing Chinese and international students to pair up for learning and joint participation in projects and activities to enhance mutual understanding and respect. Additionally, encourage international students to participate in Chinese students' social activities to promote bilateral cultural exchange.

5.3 Establish Assessment and Feedback Mechanisms

Educational institutions should establish assessment and feedback mechanisms. Through regular student feedback surveys, learning outcome assessments, and teaching practice reflection, educational institutions can timely adjust and optimize cross-cultural education strategies to ensure educational activity effectiveness.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined Universities A and B as case studies, exploring how these universities influence students' cross-cultural competence development through curriculum design, teaching models, and teacher-student activities. The research finds that Sino-foreign cooperative universities create all-English learning environments through language course arrangements, which not only enhance students' academic English abilities but also establish solid foundations for their professional studies. Small-class teaching models and personalized guidance provide more interaction opportunities, promoting both academic English ability improvement and cross-cultural communication competence development.

Regarding informal learning environments, this study finds that the "tutorial system", "office hours", and email have become primary channels for cross-cultural communication between teachers and students. These channels provide an inclusive space where students can freely express their views. However, cross-cultural communication opportunities between Chinese and international students remain generally limited, possibly due to extracurricular interactions focusing primarily on academic discussions, limited contact opportunities with international classmates, and phenomena of international faculty and students' "Sinicization" and "group isolation". Despite limited cross-cultural communication opportunities, students experienced processes of mutual understanding and adjustment through interactions with international classmates, ultimately promoting their understanding and adaptation to cultural differences and enhancing their cross-cultural communication abilities.

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