

Integrating Red Culture into Foreign Language Education in Chinese Institutions of Higher Learning—A Path Analysis Using “Understanding Contemporary China: A Reading & Writing Course” as a Case Study

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Abstract: *The present study aims to investigate the practical pathway for educators to integrate red culture into foreign language education in Chinese institutions of higher learning, using “Understanding Contemporary China: A Reading & Writing Course” as a case study. Drawing upon such pedagogical theories as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Competency-Based Education (CBE), and Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), the study addresses the potential value, current challenges, and coping strategies in the process of integrating red culture into college foreign language education, with a systematic pathway framework proposed from five dimensions to that end. It is concluded that the integration of red culture into college foreign language education not only conduces to boosting college students’ language proficiency, cultural confidence, and cross-cultural communication ability but also serves the long-term mission to tell China’s stories well and strengthen morality education in universities.*

Keywords: *Red Culture; Foreign Language Education; Path and Strategy*

1. Introduction

In a new era marked by rapid technological advancements and growing cross-cultural communications, the landscape of foreign language education in China, especially English as a Foreign Language Education (EFL), is facing the dual challenge of enhancing students’ proficiency in foreign language skills and fostering their qualities of good character, virtue, and moral integrity^[1]. Red culture, forged through blood, sweat and tears during China’s revolutionary, construction, and reform periods under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), is a vital part of China’s cultural heritage imbued with profound historical depth, cultural legacy and educational value^{[2][3]}. Hence, as an important part of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics, red culture deserves to be inherited and promoted by the younger generation in China, especially young college students who are at a crucial stage of transition from adolescence to adulthood, from school to society as well as from education to employment.

In the domain of foreign language education, there has been a growing emphasis and consensus on the need to implement curriculum-based ideological and political education (IPE). Against this backdrop, integrating red culture into language teaching curriculums is therefore both essential and instrumental in fostering socialist core values among college students while strengthening their sense of history, nation and culture. Meanwhile, scholars argue that the incorporation or embedding of red culture into foreign language education can not only enrich the cultural dimension of language learning, but also cultivate students’ critical thinking, intercultural competence, and sense of national identity^{[1][4]}. A case in point is the “Understanding Contemporary China” textbook series compiled and published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. Among them, “Understanding Contemporary China: A Reading & Writing Course” (hereinafter referred to as the “English Reading & Writing Course”) provides a favorable platform for college English teachers to integrate red culture into classroom instruction.

Using the English Reading & Writing Course as an example, this study attempts an investigation into the pathways to and strategies for integrating red culture into foreign language teaching in Chinese universities, addressing the theoretical basis, current situation and potential challenges that might arise

in the integration process. It is hoped that results of the present study will be of useful reference to educational stakeholders in their efforts to pivot towards a curriculum-based ideological and political education model in foreign language education.

2. Theoretical Basis and Practical Significance

2.1 Theoretical Foundations Supporting Red Culture Integration

The integration of red culture into foreign language teaching at universities is theoretically grounded in such pedagogical theories as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Competency-Based Education (CBE), and Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), which together provide a solid foundation for its feasibility, necessity, and practical implementation.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) emphasizes the combination of subject matter learning with foreign language acquisition, enabling students to gain disciplinary knowledge while simultaneously improving their communicative competence^[5]. This theory lends direct support to the integration of red culture (as content) into foreign language teaching (as language), as it creates a dual focus where students can deepen their understanding of national culture and at the same time strengthen their foreign language proficiency. According to CLIL, language learning should occur in meaningful contexts where learners acquire knowledge of subject content while simultaneously developing communicative skills and competence^[6]. Red culture, in this regard, provides rich and authentic content that not only deepens students' understanding of China's historical and cultural narratives but also creates meaningful contexts for practicing language, thereby enhancing both language proficiency and cultural confidence on the part of college students. On a deeper level, CLIL aligns with the basic principles of constructivist learning, emphasizing knowledge acquisition through active engagement with meaningful content. This particular theory lends credence to the integration of red culture into foreign language teaching, as students can construct their understanding of both language knowledge and cultural content simultaneously, fostering deeper comprehension, critical reflection, and the ability to apply knowledge in authentic communicative contexts.

Competency-Based Education (CBE) lays store by learners' ability to apply knowledge and skills in authentic contexts, making it especially relevant to language learning and cultural integration^[7]. CBE focuses on developing students' comprehensive competencies, including knowledge, skills, attitudes, and last but not least values. Contemporary college students are endowed with the mission to tell China's stories well, which requires that they cultivate strong cross-cultural communication competence, critical thinking, and the ability to convey Chinese narratives in authentic, persuasive, and globally intelligible English. To that end, the integration of red culture into foreign language teaching provides both rich content resources and value orientation, enabling students to strengthen cultural confidence, deepen historical awareness, and enhance their capacity to express China's voice effectively on the global stage. Through an integration of red culture and language learning, college students would find themselves immersed in meaningful historical and cultural contexts, allowing them to internalize core values, advertently or inadvertently, while developing their English communication skills simultaneously. Above all, learning red culture fosters positive values—patriotism, collectivism, and social responsibility—which stand as essential parts of students' core competencies.

Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) stresses the importance of situational and contextualized learning, which nonetheless entails carefully designed learning environments and tasks to ensure that students can connect language use with cultural, historical, and social contexts in a meaningful manner^[8]. According to CTL, language learning should not occur in isolation from real-life contexts but rather be embedded in meaningful situations that connect language use with social, cultural, and practical experiences. It is precisely due to this emphasis on authentic contexts that integrating red culture into foreign language teaching provides rich, relevant scenarios—such as historical events, revolutionary narratives, and cultural practices—through which students can develop both linguistic skills and a deeper understanding of China's rich cultural heritage. By designing teaching activities around these contexts, teachers can help students grasp both the meaning and use of language in cultural settings, thereby improving their pragmatic competence in real-life communication. Hence, it is fitting and proper to incorporate red culture into foreign language teaching, as it offers authentic cultural contexts that enhance students' ability to use language effectively, think critically, and communicate China's values and stories with clarity and confidence.

2.2 Practical Significance and Educational Value of Red Culture Integration

The integration of red culture into foreign language education at universities, if properly handled, can work its charm on college students by enhancing students' language proficiency, deepening their understanding of Chinese history and values, and cultivating a strong sense of cultural confidence and national identity. The reason behind lies in the fact that red culture is a core component of ideological and political education in universities, playing a significant role in fostering patriotism and edifying morality amongst college students.

Integrating red culture into foreign language education at universities conduces to enhancing college students' cross-cultural communication competence and ability to tell China's stories well to an international audience. In an era of rapid globalization and cultural diversity, foreign language education in China aims not only to teach foreign cultures but also to strengthen students' understanding of their own cultural heritage, foster cultural confidence, and equip them with the ability to communicate Chinese values and stories effectively on the global stage. It is not an exaggeration to say that, without a strong grasp of Chinese culture and society, students may struggle to represent China accurately and persuasively on international occasions, to the detriment of their effectiveness in cross-cultural communication and their ability to tell China's stories well [9]. By learning to express red culture accurately in foreign languages, students can introduce China's history and values to international audiences, thereby strengthening China's cultural soft power and global influence.

Integrating red culture into foreign language education at universities conduces to enriching the content of teaching materials, broadening students' cultural horizons, and making language learning more engaging, relevant, and meaningful. By resorting to such materials as revolutionary texts, memoirs of historical figures, and accounts of significant events, foreign language teachers can provide students with authentic and context-rich content that helps develop their language skills and deepens their understanding of China's storied cultural heritage. Besides, with the advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies, it will be easier for foreign language teachers to provide students with diverse and contextually meaningful examples tailored for reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities. Under such circumstances, college students will be in a better position to gain a deeper understanding of China's historical struggles, values, and contemporary development while considerable benefits will accrue to them regarding the enhancement of their language proficiency, the cultivation of cross-cultural communication skills, the strengthening of cultural confidence, and the ability to convey Chinese narratives compellingly in global contexts.

Integrating red culture into foreign language education at universities conduces to promoting students' positive emotions and attitudes, reducing learning burnout. Recent research indicates that language education that engages learners emotionally—by connecting learning content to meaningful cultural, historical, or social experiences—can significantly enhance motivation, increase enjoyment, and improve persistence, leading to more effective and sustained language acquisition [1][4]. The stories of patriotism, devotion, perseverance, selflessness, idealism, et cetera, in red culture can redound to fostering students' moral values, inspiring a sense of social responsibility, and cultivating intrinsic motivation for learning, thereby enhancing both their emotional engagement and overall educational experience. When students perceive the connection between language learning and the inheritance of cultural and national values, they are more likely to experience a sense of purpose, motivation, and achievement, which enhances engagement, deepens learning, and fosters both linguistic competence and cultural awareness. Hence, integrating red culture into foreign language education not only supports students' language development but also cultivates their positive emotions and a better outlook on the world, life, and values.

3. Current Situation and Existing Problems

In recent years, with the deepening of education reform and the strong promotion of ideological and political education in colleges and universities, integrating red culture into foreign language education has gained increasing attention. A number of universities have started exploring ways to incorporate red culture into college English teaching, with EFL teachers selecting and compiling English reading materials related to red culture, introducing red culture topics in classroom discussions, or organizing students to watch English documentaries on China's revolutionary history [10]. In regions with rich red cultural resources, local universities have taken the lead in combining local red resources with foreign language education, exploring context-specific integration paths [10]. However, existing research also highlights several pressing challenges in integrating red culture into foreign language education. These include outdated teaching philosophies that undervalue cultural integration, limited coverage of red

culture in textbooks, overreliance on traditional teacher-centered teaching methods that restrict student engagement, and a lack of systematic professional development to equip instructors with both the cultural literacy and innovative teaching strategies needed for effective integration.

One major challenge is the prevalence of outdated teaching philosophies that focus solely on grammar and vocabulary, in which students spend much time memorizing rules and doing drills, to the neglect of how language connects to culture. Culture is often treated as something “extra” or “nice to know,” rather than as an integral dimension of language acquisition. As a result, opportunities to engage students in exploring how language conveys values, identity, and historical memory—such as through the study of red culture—are often neglected or reduced to surface-level activities that fail to spark genuine interest or critical thinking. Updating teaching methods to value culture as much as language would make learning more engaging and help students use foreign language to tell China’s stories more effectively.

Another pressing issue in integrating red culture into foreign language education is the limited coverage of relevant content in textbooks. While traditional college English textbooks tend to prioritize Western literature, history, and cultural references, they often devote little space to Chinese perspectives, especially red culture. This creates an imbalance where students become familiar with Western cultural narratives but lack the language resources to articulate their own national history and values in English. Although newer materials, such as the “Understanding Contemporary China” textbook series, attempt to address this gap, they remain supplementary rather than mainstream in the overall curriculum arrangement. Consequently, red culture often appears as something supplementary rather than a core element, which undermines its influence and reduces students’ chances to engage critically with their own cultural heritage.

Overreliance on teacher-centered instruction is also partly to blame. Many teachers still adopt the traditional “teacher-centered” approach when integrating red culture into classroom instruction, simply reading or explaining red culture-related texts in class, lacking interactive and participatory teaching activities. While this approach ensures efficiency and control, it often discourages interaction, collaboration, and critical inquiry. Under such circumstances, students remain passive recipients of information rather than active participants in meaning-making, which diminishes their ability to connect red culture with real-life communication and to develop deeper cultural and linguistic competence.

A further obstacle concerns the absence of systematic professional development programs for foreign language instructors. Many teachers have limited exposure to red culture beyond a surface-level understanding, which restricts their ability to convey its richness in the classroom. Without structured opportunities to deepen their cultural literacy, chances are that foreign language teachers may rely on fragmented anecdotes or simplified narratives which fail to capture the depth of historical and ideological significance. Equally important is the shortage of training in innovative pedagogical methods suited for integrating culture and language in tandem. Too often, instruction reverts to lecture-based delivery, leaving little room for interactive activities that allow students to engage critically with cultural texts or express their perspectives in meaningful ways.

4. Specific Pathways for Red Culture Integration: A Case Study

4.1 Clarifying Teaching Objectives to Align Language and Culture

A well-advised integration of red culture into foreign language teaching requires clearly defined teaching objectives that balance language development with IPE literacy. Fortunately, the “English Reading & Writing Course” exemplifies this approach, aiming not only to strengthen students’ English reading and writing skills but also to foster awareness of Chinese history, values, and social responsibility. Language objectives focus on helping students comprehend texts on red culture, analyze main ideas and deeper meanings, and express their insights accurately and fluently in English. Concurrently, IPE literacy objectives guide students to understand the historical significance of the CPC leadership, develop patriotism, collective consciousness, and a sense of historical mission, and cultivate critical thinking about social and cultural issues. Teachers can operationalize these dual goals by setting lesson-specific objectives—for example, summarizing the deeds and spirit of revolutionary heroes in English or reflecting on how revolutionary ideals inspire contemporary students—ensuring each class advances both language competence and cultural understanding.

4.2 Optimizing Teaching Content through Systematic Integration of Red Culture

To effectively integrate red culture into foreign language teaching, foreign language teachers should systematically explore and organize the rich red culture materials embedded in the “English Reading & Writing Course”. To begin with, teachers are expected to map out all relevant units and texts, identifying themes such as revolutionary history, reform and opening-up, technological innovation, and ecological civilization. Each unit should highlight key events, figures, and achievements, allowing students to understand both historical developments and the guiding principles behind them. Moreover, it is essential to dig deeper into the underlying values and spirits behind each text and relate these to contemporary contexts. For instance, when dealing with the text titled “Today We Must Succeed in a New ‘Long March’”, teachers should guide the students to summarize the spirit of the Long March into patriotism, idealism, conviction and faith, sacrifice and dedication, self-reliance and self-sufficiency, unity and solidarity, self-discipline, people-centeredness, et cetera.

4.3 Shifting Toward a Student-Centred Teaching Method

Innovating teaching methods is essential for effectively integrating red culture into foreign language education. When it comes to the “English Reading & Writing Course”, teachers should shift from traditional teacher-centered lectures to a student-centered, interactive model that actively engages learners. This shift emphasizes collaboration, exploration, and hands-on engagement, allowing students to take ownership of their learning while deepening their understanding of red culture. Task-based learning, for example, can encourage students to complete projects related to revolutionary history or cultural heritage, while case studies can prompt critical discussion of historical figures, events, and values. Flipped classroom strategies can also allow students to engage with content independently before class, leaving classroom time for discussion, problem-solving, and interactive exercises. Together, these methods foster linguistic competence, critical thinking, and cultural awareness, enhancing both academic and personal growth.

4.4 Building a Multifaceted and Process-Oriented Evaluation System

Assessment plays a crucial role in measuring teaching effectiveness and guiding improvement. To ensure the successful integration of red culture into foreign language education, traditional single-format, final-exam-focused evaluations must be reformed. A multifaceted, process-oriented system emphasizes diverse evaluators, comprehensive content, varied methods, and clear standards. It is important to note that assessment should involve multiple perspectives: teacher evaluation, peer review, and self-assessment, which encourages reflection, collaboration, and critical thinking. Evaluation content should extend beyond language proficiency to include students’ understanding of red culture, IPE awareness, learning engagement, creativity, and practical skills. Needless to say, assessment methods should combine formative and summative approaches, such as class participation, project presentations, written assignments, English essays, and oral presentations. Critically, evaluation criteria must be transparent, operational, and balanced, covering both linguistic performance and IPE literacy.

4.5 Strengthening Teacher Professional Development for IPE Improvement

The success of integrating red culture into the “English Reading & Writing Course” relies heavily on teacher quality and expertise. Strengthening professional development and capacity building is therefore essential. To that end, systematic training programs should be offered, including workshops on red culture history, theory, and teaching strategies, as well as practical case studies. Advisably, on-site visits to revolutionary museums and memorials can deepen teachers’ experiential understanding. Regular teaching and research activities, such as collective lesson planning and departmental study groups, allow teachers to share resources, discuss challenges, and co-develop innovative lesson plans. Academic exchanges and inter-school collaborations may as well expose teachers to best practices and new ideas. More importantly, teachers should engage in continuous self-directed learning, exploring new research, reflecting on their practice, and contributing to the field through publications or reflections.

5. Conclusion

Looking ahead, integrating red culture into foreign language education at universities is a long-term and challenging endeavor that requires the concerted efforts of all educational stakeholders, such as the

authorities, universities, teachers, and students. As ideological and political education continues to develop and educational reforms advance, the pathways for integration are expected to become more diverse, precise, and intelligent. Emerging tools such as AI and virtual reality (VR) offer the potential to create immersive learning environments that bring red culture vividly to life, while big data analytics can provide insights into students' learning processes, enabling personalized instruction and targeted guidance. In conclusion, integrating red culture into the "English Reading & Writing Course" and other foreign language courses plays a vital role in developing well-rounded students who possess both language proficiency and cultural literacy.

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