

Enhancing College Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence through the Design for Change (DFC) Teaching Model

Chengchieh Su^{1,a,*}

¹School of Foreign Studies, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China

^a2226767165@qq.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: Intercultural communicative competence has become an indispensable skill for university students amid today's interconnected and multicultural world. However, traditional courses often fail to nurture it effectively, hampered by a disconnect between theory and practice, and rote, lecture-based pedagogy. The Design for Change (DFC) model, grounded in design thinking, addresses these shortcomings through its student-centered, action-oriented cycle of Feel, Imagine, Do, and Share. This study explores the DFC framework's principles and pedagogical value, demonstrates its fit with intercultural communication curricula, and proposes a reform blueprint that redefines course goals, structure, methods, and assessment. This framework connects theoretical learning with real-world practice, transforming teaching from knowledge transmission into competence cultivation and helping students engage with cultural diversity through empathy, creativity, and confidence.

Keywords: DFC Teaching Model; Intercultural Communicative Competence; Higher Education; Curriculum Reform

1. Introduction

Intercultural communicative competence has become a fundamental aspect of university students' core literacy, involving the ability to communicate effectively through the integration of cultural knowledge, practical skills, and appropriate attitudes. (Deardorff, 2004) ^[1]. Nevertheless, university intercultural communication courses confront numerous challenges: an overemphasis on theoretical instruction with scant authentic communicative experiences, resulting in a theory-practice disconnect; neglecting global diversity; teaching methods dominated by classroom lectures with insufficient interactivity; assessment confined to written examinations and papers, inadequate for gauging practical abilities; and some instructors lacking systematic training, thereby impairing instructional efficacy. As a result, many students struggle to handle cultural differences and conflicts effectively in authentic intercultural situations. The Design for Change (DFC) teaching model, based on design thinking, centers on the process of Feel, Imagine, Do, and Share. It emphasizes practice and student agency and aligns with the development of intercultural communicative competence from cognition to application, offering an innovative approach for curriculum reform.

This study integrates the DFC teaching model with intercultural communication theory, aiming to elucidate the connotations and value of the DFC model, examine its compatibility with intercultural communication courses, construct a curriculum reform framework incorporating objectives, structure, methods, and evaluation, and propose implementation recommendations. The goal is to forge an integrated "theory + practice" instructional scheme, transcend traditional pedagogical limitations, enhance instructional effectiveness, and empower students to meet the demands of globalized communication.

2. The DFC Teaching Model: Origins, Process, and Educational Value

2.1 Origins and Development of the DFC Teaching Model

DFC (Design for Change), or "designing action plans for change," originated from the "Global Children's Creative Action Challenge" promoted in 2009 by Kiran Bir Sethi, founder of the Riverside

School in India. Its initial purpose was to guide children and adolescents, through a simple and operable process, to observe problems in their surroundings, unleash creativity to solve them, and thereby foster the confidence that “I can do it”. The DFC model is grounded in design thinking, a human-centered problem-solving approach that emphasizes understanding user needs through iterative steps of empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test (Design for Change India, n.d.) [2]. Building on this framework, DFC simplifies the process into four steps: Feel, Imagine, Do, and Share, making it more applicable to educational settings and highlighting the integration of practice and reflection.

Over more than a decade of development, DFC has expanded to over 70 countries and regions worldwide, spanning six continents including the United States, Spain, Denmark, Australia, and Singapore, with applications extending from basic education to higher education and adult training (Design for Change World, n.d.) [3]. Abroad, DFC is frequently employed for addressing social issues, cultivating creativity, and nurturing civic awareness; for instance, the teacher education program at the University of Melbourne integrates the Design for Change (DFC) framework and objectives into pre-service teacher training (Khushu, 2011) [4]. In China, applications of the DFC model remain in an exploratory phase and seem to have yet to be systematically implemented in higher education’s intercultural communication courses.

2.2 Core Process of the DFC Teaching Model

The DFC model’s four-step process of “Feel-Imagine-Do-Share” forms a closed loop, with each phase interconnected and progressively layered:

1) **Feel:** Guides learners to identify problems and needs in real-life situations through observation, interviews, and personal experiences. It emphasizes the development of empathy, encouraging students to focus not only on the problem itself but also on the emotions and cultural contexts of the individuals involved.

2) **Imagine:** Based on issues identified in the “Feel” phase, organizes brainstorming and creative discussions to encourage learners to break free from conventional thinking and propose diverse solutions, stressing the stimulation of innovative and critical thinking.

3) **Do:** Transforms the optimal solution from the “Imagine” phase into concrete actions, verifying feasibility through project implementation and practical operations, underscoring “learning by doing” to deepen understanding in practice.

4) **Share:** Disseminates project outcomes, challenges, and experiences via oral reports, poster presentations, or video demonstrations, soliciting feedback from peers and instructors to foster reflection and knowledge transfer.

2.3 Educational Value of the DFC Teaching Model

The educational value of the DFC teaching model manifests primarily in three aspects:

1) **Fostering Creative Confidence:** the DFC model, by guiding learners through the complete process from “problem discovery” to “problem resolution,” enables them to personally validate that “their abilities can alter the environment,” thereby building confidence in creativity and action (Design for Change World, n.d.) [3]. This confidence boosts learning interest and also lays a psychological foundation for proactive communication in intercultural contexts.

2) **Cultivating Empathy and Cultural Sensitivity:** The “Feel” phase requires learners to understand problems from others’ perspectives, an ability to shift viewpoints that closely corresponds to the core requirement in intercultural communication of understanding diverse cultural needs. An evaluation report indicates that students participating in DFC projects showed significant improvements in understanding the needs of individuals from different backgrounds and respecting cultural differences (Design for Change World, n.d.) [3].

3) **Integrating Knowledge and Practice:** The DFC model emphasizes the operability of the “Do” phase, converting theoretical knowledge into practical abilities through project implementation, effectively bridging the gap between learning and application. The DFC model facilitates the transfer of classroom learning to extracurricular contexts, with significant improvements observed in students’ ability to accept constructive criticism and propose diverse solutions, which are essential skills for effective intercultural communication (Design for Change World, n.d.) [3].

3. Intercultural Communication Theory and Its Pedagogical Implications

3.1 Conceptual Foundations of Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication competence has been conceptualized through various components, including knowledge and motivation (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005) ^[5]. More broadly, intercultural communication can be framed from two dominant perspectives: process-oriented and competence-oriented. From the former, it refers to the exchange and construction of meaning between individuals from different cultural backgrounds through verbal and nonverbal means (Kim, 2001; Emert & Pearson, 2007) ^{[6][7]}. From the latter, it emphasizes intercultural communicative competence, the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately based on intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Lawrence, 2011) ^[8]. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that intercultural communication involves people from different cultural backgrounds sharing meaning effectively through both verbal and nonverbal interaction, supported by empathy and cultural understanding.

3.2 Dimensions of Intercultural Communicative Competence

Byram (1997, 2009) identifies five interrelated dimensions of intercultural communicative competence: attitudes (respect and openness toward other cultures), knowledge (understanding cultural values, symbols, and communication norms), skills (interpreting verbal and nonverbal cues and adapting communication styles), action competence (applying knowledge and skills to manage cultural conflicts), and critical cultural awareness (reflecting on and evaluating cultural phenomena objectively) ^{[9][10]}. These dimensions form a comprehensive framework for fostering intercultural sensitivity and adaptability in learners (for a broader synthesis, see Deardorff, 2009) ^[11].

3.3 Key Theories Explaining Cultural Differences

Hall's (1976) theory of high- and low-context cultures further explains cultural differences in communication styles ^[12]. In high-context cultures such as China and Japan, meaning relies heavily on contextual and nonverbal cues, whereas in low-context cultures like the United States and Germany, communication is explicit and direct. Understanding this distinction helps learners adjust communicative strategies and reduce misinterpretations in intercultural encounters.

Hofstede's (2001, 2010) cultural dimensions theory expands on the underlying value systems that shape communication behaviors ^{[13][14]}. The six dimensions, namely power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity, long- versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint, provide an analytical framework for understanding cultural value differences, anticipating potential conflicts, and enhancing intercultural collaboration. This framework is widely applied in intercultural education to enhance students' awareness of value-based communication differences.

3.4 Pedagogical Applications of Intercultural Theories

Byram's model also serves as a theoretical foundation for course design in intercultural communication. It helps clarify instructional objectives, guide content development for cultivating specific competencies, and optimize assessment through a combination of questionnaires, skill-based tasks, behavioral observation, and reflective reports. Integrating these theories into pedagogy enables learners to develop both the cognitive and practical dimensions of intercultural competence, promoting more effective and empathetic communication across cultures.

4. Compatibility of DFC with Intercultural Communication Courses

4.1 Process Compatibility

The cultivation of intercultural communicative competence follows the logic of "cognition-experience-application-reflection," which closely corresponds to the DFC's four-step process of "Feel-Imagine-Do-Share." The "Feel" phase, through case observation and cultural experiences, aids students in recognizing cultural differences and cultivating empathy, such as analyzing communication characteristics in Sino-African cultural exchanges. The "Imagine" phase stimulates creative thinking via brainstorming to design intercultural communication strategies. The "Do" phase applies theory to

practice through project implementation, such as organizing cultural exchange activities, to enhance skills. The “Share” phase, via outcome presentations and reflective reports, enables students to summarize experiences, transfer abilities, and deepen critical cultural awareness.

Crucially, although various frameworks conceptualize intercultural communicative competence, including Deardorff’s (2004) process model^[1], Chen and Starosta’s (1996) model^[15], this study adopts Byram’s (1997, 2009) five-dimensional model as its primary foundation for three reasons^{[9][10]}. First, it holistically integrates cognitive (knowledge), affective (attitudes), and behavioral (skills) dimensions with critical cultural awareness (a metacognitive element often neglected elsewhere), thus corresponding closely to the DFC process, namely empathy (Feel), creativity (Imagine), action (Do), and reflection (Share). Second, designed specifically for pedagogical use in foreign language education, its dimensions provide clear, actionable objectives for course design and evaluation, ideal for curriculum reform. Third, its developmental sequence (attitudes/knowledge, skills, critical awareness) mirrors the DFC process (Feel, Imagine, Do, Share), facilitating theory-practice integration.

4.2 Methodological Compatibility

The DFC model addresses issues in intercultural communication courses, including the disconnection between theory and practice, uniform content, and conventional teaching methods, by adopting diverse and student-centered instructional approaches that foster engagement, creativity, and practical competence. The “Do” phase converts theory into competence via project practice (e.g., simulated intercultural negotiations), compensating for practical deficiencies. The brainstorming in “Imagine” and project design in “Do” incorporate diverse cultures (e.g., Sino-African exchanges), broadening students’ cultural cognition. The interactive methods in “Feel” and “Share,” such as case analysis and outcome presentations, heighten classroom engagement and student agency. DFC shifts assessment from reliance on written exams alone to comprehensive evaluation of project outcomes, reflective reports, and practical performance, fully gauging student abilities.

4.3 Theoretical Compatibility

The DFC model complements intercultural communication theories, providing a pathway integrating theory and practice in instruction. High- and low-context culture theory guides DFC project design, such as analyzing implicit versus direct communication differences in Sino-African exchanges to optimize strategies (Hall, 1976)^[12]. Cultural dimensions theory assists students in anticipating cultural conflicts in team collaboration, enhancing project efficacy (Hofstede, 2001)^[13]. Byram’s competence model furnishes a framework for DFC project evaluation, encompassing dimensions like attitudes, knowledge, and skills, ensuring scientific and comprehensive assessment. DFC projects validate theoretical effects through practice, deepening students’ understanding and application of theories.

While the classic theories this framework draws upon, such as Byram’s model, originate in the West, this very tension highlights the intrinsic value of the DFC model. DFC is essentially a process-oriented approach rather than a fixed system prescribing specific content. It does not predetermine cultural knowledge; instead, through the “Feel” and “Imagine” phases, it enables students (for instance, Chinese learners) to apply established theoretical tools to actively explore and address non-Western challenges within their local context (such as Sino-African communication). This methodology ensures that the learning process genuinely transcends the passive instruction of Western-centric content through active, localized practice.

5. DFC-Based Curriculum Reform Framework

5.1 Objective Reshaping

Course objectives shift from knowledge transmission to competence cultivation, adapting to globalized intercultural communication demands: (1) Master high- and low-context culture theory, cultural dimensions theory, and the Byram competence model to comprehend the roots of cultural differences and communication rules; (2) Employ the DFC process to identify intercultural conflicts, design and implement solutions, flexibly adjust communication strategies, and enhance practical and collaborative abilities; (3) Cultivate respect and inclusiveness toward other cultures, foster global awareness and social responsibility, build communicative confidence, and adapt to multicultural environments.

5.2 Structural Optimization

The course adopts a dual-track “theory + project” structure, totaling 32 hours over 16 weeks (2 hours per week), ensuring balance between theoretical input and practical application. Theoretical learning (30%, approximately 9.6 hours) employs lectures, case discussions, and group seminars to cover intercultural communication theories (e.g., high- and low-context, cultural dimensions theory, Byram model) and the DFC process, solidifying students’ theoretical foundation in cultural differences and project design. Project practice (70%, approximately 22.4 hours) centers on the DFC’s “Feel-Imagine-Do-Share” process, with students in groups conducting intercultural projects to integrate theory and practice and cultivate comprehensive abilities. The theoretical module emphasizes knowledge systematicity, while the practice module stresses student agency, deepening skills and literacy through project tasks; the parallel tracks ensure learning depth and practical outcomes.

5.3 Methodological Innovation

Diverse teaching methods are designed based on the DFC process to stimulate student initiative: (1) The “Feel” phase employs case analysis and interviews to dissect the roots of cultural differences, cultivating empathy and cultural sensitivity; (2) The “Imagine” phase uses brainstorming to devise innovative communication strategies, reinforcing creative thinking; (3) The “Do” phase implements projects to apply theory in practice, enhancing operational and collaborative abilities; (4) The “Share” phase involves outcome presentations and reflective reports to summarize experiences, promoting ability transfer and confidence building.

5.4 Evaluation Innovation

A process-oriented evaluation system is constructed, grounded in the Byram model and DFC process, to assess students’ attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness. Evaluation encompasses: (1) Case analysis reports from the “Feel” phase, assessing understanding of cultural differences and empathy (Fantini, 2009) ^[16]; (2) Project proposals from the “Imagine” phase, examining accuracy of theory application and solution creativity; (3) Implementation performance in the “Do” phase, evaluating practical operations and team collaboration; (4) Outcome presentations and reflective reports from the “Share” phase, measuring outcome quality and reflection depth. Combining instructor evaluation, peer review, and self-assessment with explicit criteria (e.g., accuracy of theory application, solution feasibility, collaboration effectiveness, and reflection profundity) ensures objectivity and fairness. Evaluation balances process and outcomes, providing targeted feedback to guide continuous improvement and elevate intercultural communicative competence.

6. Implementation Guidelines for the DFC Model

6.1 Enhancing Instructor Capabilities

Instructors are pivotal to curriculum reform and must deeply master the DFC process (Feel, Imagine, Do, Share) and intercultural communication theories (e.g., high- and low-context, cultural dimensions theory) through professional training. Training content includes project design, student guidance techniques, and theory application methods; instructors should accumulate diverse cultural cases, participate in educational innovation exchanges, and enhance practical guidance capabilities to ensure effective DFC implementation.

6.2 Resource Support System

A robust resource support system underpins DFC implementation. Course manuals should be compiled, including DFC process guidelines, project templates, and diverse cultural cases; online collaboration platforms should be established to facilitate student teamwork and real-time instructor guidance; pairing mechanisms with international students and on- and off-campus practice bases should be created to provide authentic intercultural scenarios; teaching reform funding should be secured to support resource development and activity organization, ensuring smooth course progression.

6.3 Key Implementation Considerations

The DFC model means keeping the project informal, aligning designs with intercultural communication aims, and engaging students. Global cultural diversity should be addressed by incorporating content from multiple regions to broaden perspectives. Evaluation criteria should integrate quantitative (e.g., solution feasibility) and qualitative (e.g., reflection depth) indicators for objectivity and thoroughness. Instructors should assume a facilitator role, encouraging autonomous exploration to cultivate independent thinking and problem-solving abilities.

7. Conclusion

This study aims to propose a theoretically sound and potentially valuable curriculum reform framework by integrating the DFC teaching model with intercultural communication theory. While the framework demonstrates strong theoretical coherence and logical feasibility, its practical effectiveness requires empirical validation through pilot implementations. The DFC's "Feel-Imagine-Do-Share" process fosters empathy, innovative thinking, problem-solving skills, and confidence, closely corresponding to the requirements of intercultural communicative competence. High- and low-context theory, cultural dimensions theory, and Byram's competence model serve as theoretical foundations that guide project design and evaluation. The DFC process also reflects the developmental logic of "cognition, experience, application, and reflection" in competence cultivation. It addresses common issues in traditional courses, including the disconnection between theory and practice and the lack of diversity in content, through activities such as case analysis, brainstorming, project implementation, and outcome presentation, thereby enhancing instructional effectiveness. Using diverse teaching methods together with a process-based evaluation system helps ensure that theory is applied effectively, enhance intercultural communication competence, and creates new opportunities for intercultural communication teaching in universities."

However, this study has certain limitations that chart directions for future development. Given the scarcity of literature on the DFC model in higher education's intercultural domain, the breadth of theoretical analysis warrants expansion; future efforts could incorporate more practical cases and interdisciplinary research. As this study is conceptual and theoretical in nature, empirical studies are needed to assess student competence gains. Insufficient exploration of case details and multidisciplinary applicability can be addressed by supplementing specific instructional scenarios and cross-disciplinary applications to bolster practicality. Moreover, trends in digital intercultural communication receive inadequate attention. Future studies could integrate online platforms and virtual settings into the DFC model. Subsequent research may validate framework efficacy through experiments, develop instructor training resources, explore DFC adaptability across disciplines and student cohorts, and incorporate digital education trends to drive ongoing innovation in intercultural communication courses.

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