Cultivation of Middle School Students’ English Core Competencies From American 5C Standards

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As a guideline and beacon of the reform of foreign language education, American 5C standards are summarized as five words starting with C: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. The English core competencies of China are composed of four aspects: linguistic competence, cultural character, thinking quality, and learning ability. Though the description of American 5Cs and English core competencies are not identical, they have some obvious similarities and consistency in common. Developing English core competencies is one of the major measures to deepen the reform of basic education English curriculum. When the new curriculum reform is fully promoted, the analysis and research of American 5C standards can not only enrich the foreign language curriculum theory of China, but also provide reference to the English teaching reform and the cultivation of students’ core competencies of English. After analyzing the current problems in middle schools, this paper proposes three strategies to cultivate the English core competencies of middle school students.

Keywords: English core competencies, American 5C standards, strategies

Introduction

Formulated by the US government in 1990s, “Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century” are composed of five dimensions: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities, which all start with letter C, so they are called 5C standards for foreign language learning. 5C standards not only reflect the individual characteristics of the foreign language policy of the United States, but also greatly promote the reforms of foreign language education in the United States. The 5C standards are regarded as the most cutting-edge language acquisition theory in the contemporary era.

Chinese educational reform put emphasis on students’ all-around development, of which the development of their core competencies is one of the most essential constituents. It is well acknowledged that the core competencies include knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and so on, which not only benefit the individuals to adapt themself to the society but also promote the development of the individuals in the future. If the core competencies are the top-level design of educational reform, the English subject competency is the bridge between the top-level design and the educational practice (Liang & Wang, 2017). As far as the subject core competencies concerned, English core competencies cover four aspects which include linguistic competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning abilities.

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Key Concepts of 5C Standards

The standards for foreign language learning are organized within five goal areas: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. None of these goals stands alone; they are interconnected. Each goal area contains two to three content standards. These standards describe the knowledge and abilities that all students should acquire by the end of their high school education (Wang, 2012).

Communication

Communication means that students can communicate with others by the target language and it includes three standards which are interpersonal communication, interpretive communication, and presentational communication.

“Standard 1.1: Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions” (Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century, 2006, p. 42). This standard focuses on interpersonal communication which means that students can obtain information from others or express information to others through conversation.

“Standard 1.2: Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics” (Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century, 2006, p. 43). This standard focuses on the understanding and interpretation of written and spoken language. Unlike interpersonal communication, interpretive communication involves one-way listening and reading in which the learner works with a variety of print and non-print materials.

“Standard 1.3: Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics” (Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century, 2006, p. 45). This standard focuses on the presentation of information, concepts, and ideas in spoken and written modes.

Cultures

Culture refers to acquiring and understanding related knowledge of other cultures, including cultural customs and cultural products.

“Standard 2.1: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied” (Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century, 2006, p. 50). This standard focuses on the practices that are derived from the traditional ideas, attitudes, and values of a culture.

“Standard 2.2: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied” (Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century, 2006, p. 51). This standard focuses on the products of the culture studied and on how they reflect the perspectives of that culture.

Students can acquire and understand cultural knowledge including cultural customs and cultural products. The culture here includes cultural concepts, cultural customs, and cultural products. Among them, cultural concepts include values, attitudes, and ideas in the human brain; cultural customs include methods of communication and customary habits; cultural products include laws, books, games, food, handcrafts, and so on. The two standards require teachers to actively create a suitable environment in teaching, allowing students to personally experience cultural content related to the course content. For example, in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, when talking about dumplings, the teacher can explain why they eat dumplings during the
Spring Festival, and then prepare the materials for making dumplings, and then ask the students to make dumplings, cook dumplings, and enjoy dumplings together.

**Connections**

The connection refers to connecting with other disciplines and obtaining information and diverse perspectives in order to use the language to function in academic and career-related situations. This goal includes two standards.

“Standard 3.1: Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language” (*Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*, 2006, p. 54).

“Standard 3.2: Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures” (*Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*, 2006, p. 56).

Learning is not confined to a specific discipline anymore and it has become interdisciplinary. English learning plays a key role by connecting with other disciplines and expands the students’ educational experiences. For example, the design of interdisciplinary in English class means that students are not only learning knowledge of English, but also can involve knowledge of history, music, art and math, chemistry and physical etc, which can open to door to consolidating and strengthening their knowledge of other subjects during the process of learning English. If the teacher can integrate the knowledge of other subjects into English class, English learning will contribute to the entire educational experience and the all-round development of students.

**Comparisons**

The comparison includes two standards: the first standard focuses on the nature of language, the second on the concept of culture.

“Standard 4.1: Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own” (*Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*, 2006, p. 58).

“Standard 4.2: Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own” (*Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*, 2006, p. 60).

Students will gain the ability to compare the differences between Chinese and English as well as understand the similarities and differences between Chinese culture and American culture during the process of English learning. If the teachers bear culture and comparison on their mind, which mean to arouse students’ awareness of culture and comparison, students will gradually compare English and western culture with their native language and Chinese culture. Teachers should guide and encourage students to make such comparisons. The students are likely to have a better understanding of Chinese and American festivals if they are encouraged to compare the different ways of celebrating festivals, such as Spring Festival and Christmas, Mid-autumn Festival and Thanksgiving. The cultural comparison can not only improve the application ability of the target language but also can strengthen students’ understanding of both cultures.

**Communities**

Communities means the communication and interaction with cultural competence in order to the participate in multilingual community activities in nationwide and the worldwide. It includes two standards: endless learning and lifelong learning.
“Standard 5.1: Students use the knowledge both within and beyond the school setting” (Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century, 2006, p. 64).

“Standard 5.2: Students show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment” (Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century, 2006, p. 66).

As a tool for communication, the speakers can communicate with other people in schools, in the community, and abroad with a foreign language they have mastered. They can also enrich their personal lives by accessing various entertainment and information sources and experiencing different cultures which can develop their language skills and understanding of the culture of the foreign language.

Problems of the Cultivation of Middle School Students’ English Core Competencies

After conducting serial of interviews and questionnaires, the author found that there were some problems that needed to be solved to cultivate the English core competencies of middle school students and they are summarized as follows. (1) Both the teachers and students focus on the acquisition of language knowledge, and overlook the improvement of students’ ability to communicate with English. (2) Aiming to get high score of entrance examination, the teacher neglected the cultivation of students’ cultural awareness; some of the middle school students did not sufficiently understand Chinese culture and lack cultural self-confidence, let alone compare Chinese culture with American culture. (3) English teachers are the controllers of the class, and knowledge instillation and mechanical reciting cannot stimulate students’ potential, let alone cultivate their thinking quality. (4) The learning ability of most middle school students who aims to get high scores of the exam is comparatively weak.

Strategies for Improving Middle School Students’ English Core Competencies From American 5C Standards

Core competencies are the soul of the new curriculum standard, and it is also the direction for the future development of Chinese education. The newly revised English curriculum standards for high schools in 2017 put forward that the English core competencies are the key basis for the formulation of new English curriculum standards, the concrete embodiment of core competencies in English, and the specific expression of students’ ability cultivation. The English core competencies are composed of four aspects which are linguistic competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability.

The American 5C standards offers a vision of what students should know and be able to do with another language and it can provide reference to the reform of English teaching in China. Starting from American 5C standards, the author put forward three strategies to cultivate students’ English core competencies.

Improving Students’ Linguistic Competence by Creating Communicative Environment

The field of language teaching is increasingly advocating a new teaching principle which allows students to communicate meaningfully in situations to achieve the purpose of learning. Being the most important one of the 5C standards, communication requires students to be able to communicate in the target language and it contains three modes which are interpersonal communication, interpretive communication, and presentational communication (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2011). Interpersonal communication means students ask or provide information, exchange opinions, and express feelings through conversation. Interpretive communication means students demonstrate their understanding of spoken and written texts on different subjects through expressions. Presentational communication means students illustrate different ideas and content to audiences or readers.
through expressions. These three modes all emphasize the communicative function and practicality of language.

Students can improve themselves if they are offered multiple opportunities to use English to interact with each other in a variety of situations and for multiple purposes. The more the students use English in meaningful situations, the more rapidly they master English and the more familiar they become with English. However, in real life, due to the pressure of the high school entrance examination, schools and students overemphasize language skills and knowledge while ignoring the communicative nature of English in the process of English teaching and learning. In class, many teachers did not speak English; they just use Chinese to explain vocabulary and grammar knowledge, so the input of the target language in the classroom is rather low; students have fewer opportunities to listen to English and they just passively recite the language points. Teachers do not create scenarios for students to communicate with each other, how can they cultivate students’ language skills? Therefore, in order to cultivate students’ linguistic ability, how to create a communicative environment is the top priority of the reform. Teachers could cultivate students’ language ability by providing them with meaningful contents and emotional scenes in class. When the students’ attention is focused on transmitting and receiving the original messages of both, the sender and the receiver are interested in the information, and the environment is important for both parties. They can actively use language to achieve the purpose of communication.

**Cultivating Students’ Cultural Awareness and Thinking Ability by Making Comparisons**

Language is an indispensable carrier of culture. Culture finds a better representation through the use of language (Wang, 2012). Language is a part of a culture, while culture is a part of a language; language and culture are so closely related to each other that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. According to the English linguist Wang Zongyan, the relationship between language and culture can be expressed as language is an integral part of culture, and it is also the carrier of culture. The teaching and dissemination of culture must rely on language. Language is influenced by culture and vice versa.

Just as Standards 4.1 and 4.2 described, the students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language and concept of culture through comparisons of the language studied and their own. So by comparing Chinese with English, students will discover Chinese and English have different word orders, grammatical and textual structures, and so on. Sometimes the learners cannot find the counterpart of a concept in English, and vice verse. By comparing Chinese with English, students will find there are some cultural differences which can range from customs and habits such as the names and address to traditions such as the way to celebrate holidays.

Through these linguistic and cultural comparisons, students will benefit from three aspects. Firstly, they will gain a better understanding of both their own language and target language. Secondly, they will gain a better understanding of their own culture as well as target language’s culture. Last but not least, comparison is significantly conducive to the development of their critical thinking which also promotes the development of students’ autonomous learning ability.

In today’s world, international cooperation and exchanges are becoming more extensive, and cross-cultural communication is becoming increasingly important. Mutual understanding and effective communication of language is the main tool of international cooperation and cross-cultural communication. A language carries the cultural traditions of a country and the way of thinking of a nation. The cultural charm of a country and the cohesion of a nation are mainly expressed and transmitted through the language used.
Mastering a language is to master the key to a country’s culture. Learning different kinds of languages is conducive to understanding the differences of different cultures.

**Cultivating Students’ English Learning Ability by Strengthening the Discipline Connections**

There are two reasons for the teachers to abide by Connections of American 5C standards during the process of their teaching. First of all, in order to gradually improve students’ communication skills, language proficiency and standardization, it is necessary for the teachers to provide and supplement meaningful knowledge of other subjects during teaching. To communicate effectively, both the teachers and students must use some knowledge and information as the content of the communication. The addition of subject knowledge teaching provides a meaningful environment for students to communicate with English which will stimulate students’ interest to employ English. Secondly, connecting with knowledge of other subjects is in accordance with the need of “comprehensible input”. Students can understand English used by the teachers because the students have had specific experience with the content or the students have been familiar with the relevant information.

As a subject, English has no specific content knowledge except for the knowledge of itself. The content of English can include a variety of knowledge in the field of history, geography, science, and society. Learning natural sciences, mathematics, social sciences, etc., through English can not only promote the students’ application ability and practical level of English, but also expand their knowledge of other subjects. As a carrier of culture, the students can absorb the essence of western culture, get to know themselves and others, and get to know the world to enhance cross-cultural awareness in the process of English Learning.

**Conclusion**

The study of communication and communities of American 5Cs is conducive to the development and improvement of students’ English language ability in middle school English teaching. The study of cultures and comparisons of American 5Cs is conducive to the cultivation of students with Chinese feelings, international outlook, and cross-cultural communication skills, which can promote to enhance Chinese students’ cultural self-confidence, and help them tell Chinese stories in a much more effective way. The study of connections can help students strengthen the connections between disciplines in the English learning process.

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