

# Incorporating Critical Thinking in Cross-cultural Comparisons

## A Case Study of Teaching the Course *a Guide to English-speaking Countries*

Xiangyu Jiang

School of Languages and Literature  
Harbin Institute of Technology, Weihai  
Weihai, P.R.China

Xin Wang

School of Languages and Literature  
Harbin Institute of Technology, Weihai  
Weihai, P.R.China

Jiixin Zou

School of Languages and Literature  
Harbin Institute of Technology, Weihai  
Weihai, P.R.China

**Abstract**—Cultivating critical thinking (CT) and intercultural communication competence (ICC) currently has been put on the top agenda in English teaching and education. Effective and successful communication across cultures is established on the premise of CT and ICC as well since these two skills overlap to a certain extent [1]. This paper explores how to integrate the cultivation of CT and ICC in the course of *A Guide to English-Speaking Countries* via a series of teaching cases including video clips and factual matters. Through certain leading questions proposed by the teacher, students' elicited reflections as in-class compositions are collected and analyzed. The research provides some pedagogical indication for teaching similar English courses in the program of general education.

**Keywords**—critical thinking; intercultural communication competence; general education

### I. INTRODUCTION

In today's world, globalization and technological progress link people from different countries and regions closely. As the most widely-used language in the world, English is an important tool in international communication, and technological and cultural exchanges. Therefore, the cultivation of students' intercultural communication skills has become an essential circle in English teaching in China. However, in the face of members of a particular group or culture, we are more likely to stereotype or overgeneralize them, which sometimes would lead to misunderstandings, cultural bias, and even hinder intercultural communication. As a consequence, the latest version of Higher Education Teaching Syllabus [2] set a new goal for college English

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courses, namely "to cultivate students' English application ability, to strengthen their intercultural communication's consciousness and skills, and at the same time, to develop their autonomous learning ability and improve their comprehensive cultural literacy". Moreover, with the increasing popularity of general education, how to integrate critical thinking (CT) and intercultural communication competence (ICC) in general education especially in English courses have formed a major challenge for the majority English teachers. This article illustrates how to develop students' CT and ICC in the college English course of *A Guide to English-Speaking Countries* under the circumstance of general education in China.

### II. CRITICAL THINKING AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

#### A. Critical Thinking

CT is an essential skill for any student regardless of their learning stages. According to Sun [3], there are three critical reasons to cultivate critical thinkers in China. First, CT is one of the ultimate goals of China Higher Education. Second, CT is the common commission of top-ranking universities in the world. No matter in Harvard or Princeton University, CT is on the top of their cultivating agenda. Last but not least, CT has the transferable property which would be conducive to one's later life experience or various working conditions. Nonetheless, due to the fact that many Chinese teachers of English still stick to traditional way of teaching, such as grammar or translation teaching, and the relatively low English proficiency of students compared with those in European countries, how to involve CT in English classroom especially in Higher Education period is an urgent and core problem that is worth attention.

Even though there is no consensus on the definition of CT, it is widely acknowledged that the definition of CT

should be traced back to the work of John Dewey [4] who at that time called CT ‘reflective thinking’ as ‘...active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends’. To be more specific, according to Dewey, CT requires active, persistent, and careful thought and attention. During the thinking process, one actively puts forward questions, searches relevant information, ponders over the basis or knowledge for one’s own belief and their mutual logical consequences; meanwhile inspects evidence, examines hypothesis and finally compares results with existing facts instead of accepting without hesitation or doubt.

The more widely accepted and influential definition of CT is proposed by a group of experts in the Delphi Research Project in 1990 [5]. By them, CT is defined as ‘...purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as the explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based’. In their definition, they identified six essential cognitive skills (interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation) and a set of affective dispositions beneficial to the practice of CT. The consensus list of CT cognitive skills and sub-skills is shown in "Table I".

TABLE I. CRITICAL THINKING COGNITIVE SKILLS

Cognitive Skills		
	<i>Skill</i>	<i>Sub-skills</i>
1	Interpretation	Categorization Decoding Significance Clarifying Meaning
2	Analysis	Examining Ideas Identifying Arguments Analyzing Arguments
3	Evaluation	Assessing Claims Assessing Arguments
4	Inference	Querying Evidence Conjecturing Alternatives Drawing Conclusions
5	Explanation	Stating Results Justifying Procedures Presenting Arguments
6	Self-Regulation	Self-examination Self-correction

In terms of the affective dispositions, Facione [5] identified the following dominant personal attributes of a successful critical thinker such as “inquisitiveness with regard to a wide range of issues, concern to become and remain well-informed, alertness to opportunities to use critical thinking, trust in the process of reasoned inquiry, self-confidence in one’s own abilities to reason, open-mindedness regarding divergent world views, flexibility in considering alternatives and opinions, understanding of the opinions of other people, fair-mindedness in appraising reasoning, honesty in facing one’s own biases, prejudices, stereotypes, or egocentric tendencies, prudence in suspending, making or altering judgments, willingness to reconsider and revise views where honest reflection suggests that change is warranted”.

### B. Intercultural Communication Competence

There is no denying that culture is an integral part of language learning, and learning a language can also be regarded as a process of acquiring its corresponding culture. Higher Education Teaching Syllabus [2] has clearly specified the new goal of English teaching is to strengthen students’ intercultural communication awareness and competence. ICC is generally understood as one’s ability to communicate with and accept others’ viewpoints of the world by consciously reflecting and evaluating the differences that s/he understands [6]. The most authoritative classification is from Byram [7] who recognizes three major components of ICC: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Knowledge about a culture not only covers its surface (emblematic and representative elements) but also its deep facets (beliefs, values, and ideologies). Skills refer to one is able to detect, make comparison and contrast, understand unfamiliar cultural meanings through discovering, relating and interpreting. With regard to attitudes, one has to be open, ready and curious, which enables him/ her to be more tolerant and positive while encountering others’ cultural practices.

Zhang Hongling [8] further improves the Byram’s ICC construction and provides a more comprehensive framework for ICC as listed in "Table II".

TABLE II. ZHANG HONGLING’S ICC FRAMEWORK

<b>Attitudes</b>	Enhance self-consciousness and has awareness of ethnocentrism and stereotypes and get rid of prejudice; Cultivate attitudes of curiosity, openness, appreciation and empathy towards foreign cultures; Raise the awareness of cultural relativism and intercultural communication.
<b>Knowledge</b>	Accumulate knowledge on native and foreign cultures, and learn about the differences and similarities; Learn about the social context of language, and its effect on the communication process; Acquire knowledge on foreign languages and improve the ability of language use; Learn about the fundamentals of sociology and psychology, grasp the basic patterns of intercultural communication.
<b>Behavior</b>	Face up to the uncertainties in communicative context, take the challenge to meet cultural conflicts and tensions; Be willing to and be able to put oneself into others shoes, develop empathy; Better flexibility and adaptation, and can adjust one’s verbal behavior according to different culture needs; Sensitive to diverse cultures, and make observation and comparison of different cultural phenomena; Constant reflection on one’s own native culture, and intercultural communicative behavior; Be receptive to new culture and cope successfully with new intercultural environment.

The above review of CT and ICC clearly demonstrates that CT skills and ICC overlap to a certain degree. Deardorff [1] stated that ICC ‘promotes effective and appropriate decision making, but within contexts that are culturally complex’. Decision-making process undoubtedly involves the application of CT. Stier [9] also believes that

Intercultural communication education should foster CT, enabling students ‘to analyze intercultural encounters, processes and scrutinize culture-influences on one’s view of the world’. On the other hand, Stier proposes that CT is important for developing ICC in that the aforementioned cognitive skills of analysis, interpretation, inference, evaluation, explanation, and self-regulation and affective dispositions seem to be helpful, if not dispensable, in obtaining the ability mentioned in Zhang’s [8] framework. A conclusion can be drawn here is that the cultivation of CT skills and the fostering of ICC should be treated as an organic whole in education. Then how to involve ICC and CT skills in English classes, especially in courses that mainly provide general knowledge, have become a widespread concern among researchers and teachers. The following sector will illustrate the combination of ICC and CT skills in the course of *A Guide to English-Speaking Countries*, through selected cases and elicited questions proposed by the teacher, students have discovered matter of facts that they have ignored in their daily life and evaluated the merits and demerits of western values or ideologies through the comparison with the Chinese rooted beliefs or values.

### III. ANALYSIS OF TEACHING CASES

*A Guide to English-Speaking Countries* is a course that mainly provides general knowledge about English-speaking countries’(the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) geography, history, economy, politics, education, holidays, literature, etc., with the aim of letting students be familiar with major English-speaking countries’ geographical feature, major historic events, important historical documents, political system, educational system, customs, values and so on. The course is delivered in English via lecturing combined with modern computer-assisted techniques such as videos, audios and pictures. The teaching goal of this course is to help students broaden their horizon, expand their knowledge, make up for the inadequacy of their own cultural background knowledge, improve their ability of reading books on social science in English, and develop their multicultural consciousness and ICC.

When cultivating students’ CT skills and ICC, teachers carefully select and combine the cases that represent different viewpoints of Chinese and western culture. The cases not only contain overt and striking cultural contrast that immediately shock students and stimulate them to think critically about the contrast, but also embody covert examples or commonplaces that also reflect cultural differences but students take for granted. Under this circumstance, the teacher would first ask students to discuss with their classmates, let them state their own opinions, then guided students to notice the “hidden” places they have ignored, and finally required them to write a reflection as in-class composition for 20 minutes. Four cases were selected and students’ composition is analyzed to illustrate the incorporation of CT skills and ICC in this course.

#### A. Educational Differences

College students are a group of students who dream of studying in western top-ranking universities the most since they have worked extremely hard since they were primary school students and they do not enjoy the freedom no matter in class or after class while choosing their interest compared with students in western countries. The teacher exploited two videos-one film and one documentary to demonstrate educational differences between Chinese education and American and British education.

The film selected is *Monsters University* which is a 2013 American 3D computer-animated comedy film produced by Pixar Animation Studios. Even though the characters are monsters instead of humans, the teacher believes the film truly reflects American campus life since the main author has obtained her Ph.D. Degree in an American university and stayed in America for four years and a half. The teacher asked the students to find out the differences existed between American and Chinese universities including architecture, campus life, teachers’ teaching style, dorm etc., while watching the first 15 minutes of the film. Then students were allowed to discuss with their group members about the differences they have discovered. Finally, students took turn to state their opinions. The followings are the opinions from students.

- Differences in architecture

The buildings are quite old-fashioned and have the flavor of European architecture;

The buildings are comparatively much lower than those in Chinese universities;

- Differences in campus

The campus in the U.S. is much larger than that in China;

The campus is clean and beautiful, and seems to be surrounded by greens everywhere;

- Differences in teaching and learning

Students seem to be more active and relaxed in class, and they have a clear goal of studying; meanwhile, teachers are more open-minded;

Every student could have his/her own seat instead of sharing with others; special chairs are designed for those left-handed;

After students stated their opinions, the teacher led them to reflect on the reasons for those differences. Most of the cases, students provided correct reasons based on their store of knowledge, such as “America has a vast land but few population which enables them to have larger campuses and lower buildings; America used to be the colony of the U.K., and it has many European immigrants, hence its architecture has a strong European flavor.” As to the “iceberg under the sea” such as beliefs and values, the deep facet of culture, the teacher has to provide specific explanations. Equality and individualism are two values that Americans pursue as early as the country gained its independence from the U.K.

Equality endows them to regard the relationship between teachers and students as equal, therefore students can be active and relaxed and teachers are more open-minded in class. Due to the attribute of individualism, Americans always seek for ways that can satisfy their own demands instead of giving way to common behaviors or values. Through this cross-cultural comparison in education, students' cognitive skills such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation have been practiced.

The documentary selected is *Are Our Kids Tough Enough: Chinese School* produced by BBC. This documentary contains three episodes, and the teacher selected the second episode in which there is a strong conflict between the Chinese teachers and British teenagers. After watching the video, students were asked to write a reflection. Most Chinese students mentioned they were fairly shocked to see British students talk and behave freely in class, and dare to challenge their parents and teachers. A few of them questioned about the validity of this experiment, since the experiment had been intervened by the school headmaster and students' parents, and the control group students did not spend equal amount of time in study. Many students attributed the reasons for British students' slackness to the fact that the U.K. is a developed country, which enables them to avoid such heavy living burden and job-pursuing pressure compared with Chinese students who due to the "One Child Policy" become the "pearl" and hope of the whole family. Some students criticized the Chinese way of teaching while others suggested that even though it is not perfect, it is the most suitable to Chinese students. The teacher demonstrated the above valuable opinions in class and commented on the deep perspective that leads to the cultural difference. For Chinese, the viewpoints of hierarchy and authority are rooted in our culture, therefore we feel so ashamed and uncomfortable while offending authoritative persons like parents, teachers etc. In contrast, western culture is more self-centered, and they feel it is normal to challenge the authority since they may not always be "right". Therefore, we should keep fair, objective, tolerant and open attitudes toward those cultural differences.

### *B. Economical Differences*

While introducing the economy of English-speaking countries, even though students have clear understanding about the large gap existed between China and Western developed countries' economy, they have no idea about where does the gap come from, the specific composition of a country's economic system, and the influence of such kind of composition to a society as a whole. Therefore, the teacher found out some data related to the economy, listed them with the form of table as shown in "Table III" and "Table IV", and asked some leading questions to elicit students' deep thought.

TABLE III. SHARE OF GDP (2012)

Country	1 <sup>st</sup> Industry	2 <sup>nd</sup> Industry	3 <sup>rd</sup> Industry
<i>U.S.</i>	1.20%	19.10%	79.70%
<i>U.K.</i>	0.70%	21.10%	78.20%
<i>China</i>	10.10%	45.30%	44.60%

Two related questions are listed as follows.

- Why do developed nations like Britain encourage the development of the service industry?
- How do you think the Share of GDP in China? Do you think it is appropriate?

As to the first question, a large number of students mentioned the third industry has played an increasingly important role in economy in the developed countries. On the one hand, it requires a large group of people working in it so that abundant employment opportunities are provided. On the other hand, the service industry causes little pollution. Moreover, the development of the third industry could significantly enhance people's living standard and improve living quality. Some students remarked that the third industry stands for a country's soft power which is the strong representation of a country's prosperity.

With regard the second question, students held different opinions toward this one. On the one hand, students believed this kind of proportion is appropriate based on the current national conditions. China has the largest population in the world, and a large proportion of GDP in agriculture aims to solve the problem of food and clothing. Meanwhile, China can be called the manufacturing industry of the world, so there is no doubt that the ratio of the second industry is much larger than that of the U.S. and the U.K. Moreover, China is also the largest developing country in the world, and the rapid development of economy is established on the premise of powerful second industry. On the other hand, some students thought such kind of allocation of GDP share is inappropriate, and reflects the large gap in terms of economy between China and western powerful countries. However, they believe through their hard work, China would also become, if not surpass those powerful countries, a powerful country.

The teacher also presented all opinions from students in class, and then commented on the students' false perception about Chinese and American agriculture. American agriculture assumes a richness and variety unmatched in most parts of the world. Large capital investments and increasing use of highly trained labor have also contributed to the success of American agriculture. American agriculture has increasingly become an "agribusiness", a term created to reflect the big, corporate nature of many farm enterprises. Nowadays, one-third of the crops are exported to Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. In contrast, agricultural imports lag far behind, leaving a surplus in the agricultural balance of trade. China is "assumed" to be a large agricultural country, but there existed \$46.2 billion trade deficit in agriculture in 2015, which strongly conflicts with students' belief.

"Table IV" illustrates the gross national income per capita through 2012 to 2015 in the U.S., U.K., and China. After observing the data, students were required to provide their viewpoints on the gap in income among these three countries.

TABLE IV. GROSS NATIONAL INCOME PER CAPITA (DOLLAR)

Country	2012	2013	2014
<i>U.S.</i>	52,540	54,070	55,200
<i>U.K.</i>	40,600	41,590	42,690
<i>China</i>	5,870	6,740	7,380

1) *How do you think about the gap in income among the U.S., U.K., and China?* Students acknowledged the fact western countries' citizens do enjoy high standard of living due to their high income. However, they thought the income may be in direct proportion to the living expense, in other words, westerners may spend much more than Chinese do for living costs. At this time, the teacher applied her own personal experience to illustrate daily life and the subsidies and policies sponsored by the U.S. government such as food stamp and education initiatives with the aim of showing that Chinese government has done an excellent job in solving livelihood issues, however, due to the comparatively large population base, we are still lagging behind of the developed countries out of question. For one thing, we should keep the consciousness of being a great power. For another, we should confess our deficiency, and learn from other powers modestly.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It is difficult to cultivate students' CT skills and ICC in an English course in the general education program for two reasons. First, in English education, students are overwhelmed by information but this is useless for effective learning as the given information cannot be absorbed fully. CT is delivered to students as a body of knowledge together with other school subjects [5], which has been not involved in specific and vivid examples. Second, English teachers per se do not embody sufficient intercultural communication knowledge and abundant CT skills, not to mention to foster students' CT skills and ICC. This article applied four examples from the educational and economic aspects in the course *A Guide to English-Speaking Countries* to demonstrate how to incorporate CT skills and ICC in English classroom education in the general education program. First of all, the selected materials not only contain strong contrast effect, but also include matter of facts that students take for granted. Through discussion, elicited questions, reflection, and the teacher's remarks, students were stimulated to think more deeply with the application of CT skills. From students' feedback, their horizon has been broadened and their mind has been enlightened indeed. Moreover, only through the comparison between one's native culture and foreign culture, can students understand and appreciate the similarities and differences between two cultures more deeply and thoroughly.

As for the future research agenda, it would be justifiable to explore the topics of discussion that are not restricted to factual matters or academic subjects, but should include issues which have normative, moral, and ethical or public policy dimensions.

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