

# An Action Research on Teaching the Chinese Intangible Heritage Course for the Learners of College English

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**Abstract:** To help college students learn and further spread Chinese culture, we carry out a 12-week action research, based on 98 learners of college English through the methods of interviews, questionnaires and tests, to design a proper teaching model on Chinese intangible cultural heritage learning. The results are as follows: Compared with the traditional model, the ESA (Engagement-Study-Activate) model better satisfies the learners; furthermore, the ESA model can significantly improve the learners' cross-cultural communication ability, especially on the aspects of cultural knowledge and communicative skills. Lastly, two important study issues are raised for the action research in the next round.

**Keywords:** Culture teaching; Intangible cultural heritage; Action research; Cross-cultural communication

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## 1. Introduction

Foreign language teaching has involved foreign cultures for long, but students still are quite lack of the ability to talk about Chinese culture. This is due to the facts like the shortage of proper coursebooks, effective teaching methods and evaluations. All the problems stop college students further improving their cross-cultural communication ability (Zhou&Chen, 2015; Yuan, et al, 2021; Chang, 2021).

So how can we help them to walk across the obstacles? A 2-week pilot teaching based on the Chinese intangible cultural heritage is carried out among 35 college students by the author. The topic is about "porcelain handicraft". The teaching procedure is as follows: the teacher explains the key points of "porcelain handicraft" with lecture notes, displays related pictures or videos to illustrate the key points; except the culture knowledge delivering, the teacher explains some words, phrases or culture-oriented terms for students, and offers the background knowledge as well; finally the teacher summarizes the topic and assign homework. This teaching procedure seems quite standardized and maybe useful for students, but it actually doesn't work. Students are less than interesting in the topic beyond our expectation.

In order to find out the reasons, the author carried out a simple questionnaire and written interview about the students' reflections on the culture teaching. The results show: students like the intangible cultural heritage and are willing to take such a lesson, and they also find it easy enough to learn the topic, but the problem is they don't think the teaching procedure or model is helpful and motivating. Only 32% of the interviewees totally approve of the teaching model. To solve this problem about culture-oriented teaching, we are going to adopt an action research in the study.

## 2. Literature Review

Since the action research is utilized in the study, we need to explain the specific strategies we take for the study based on the previous classic theories. Kemmins&McTaggart(1982) put forward the classic model in action research: planing, operating, observing and reflecting. This model has been influencing many other models like McNiff(1988). In our study, we mainly adopt the framework of McNiff's model and take the following steps: questions raised, literature review, plan making and executing, data collecting and analyzing, and further questions raised.

Since we have raised the question previously --- "what is the proper teaching model for Chinese intangible cultural heritage", now let's review some related literature in the field of culture teaching in foreign languages.

Actually most of foreign language teachers and researchers favour the culture teaching because of the close relationship between language and culture (Lv&Yu, 2021). So the problem remained here is not about "what to teach", but "how". With the development of cross-cultural communication theories, culture teaching comes to be blended into it. A number of researches focus on creating an effective teaching model to improve learners' cross-cultural communication ability, Like Chang&Zhao(2012), Zheng&Li(2016), and Yang&Zhao(2018). here, the "cross-cultural communication ability" is defined as a combination of 3 aspects: knowledge of culture and language, attitude towards different cultures, and cross-cultural skills(Byram, 1997). Take Chang&Zhao's research as example. Based on Moran's culture-learning model of "Culture-knowings", their study tries to design a teaching model to improve students' cross-cultural consciousness, that is, describing a cross-cultural knowing, analyzing a specific case, participating in interactions, and finally reflecting on the culture differences. While other researches tries to blend elements like critical thinking(2014), flipped-classroom model(2018) into the culture teaching.

Among the researches mentioned above, the ESA teaching model advanced by J. Harmer (2000) may be helpful for us the solve

our problem of cultural teaching in motivating and involving students in language activities. E stands for “Engagement”, which means the teacher motivate the students through various activities and teaching materials, like games, questions, music, pictures, etc. S stands for “Study”, which means the teacher should consciously help students acquire language(pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, discourse, etc) and information (including culture knowledge). A stands for “Activate”, which means the teacher leads students to put the language and information acquired into practice, through various activities and exercises like role-play, discussion, debate, ads designing, story retelling and creation, etc. In the class, the teaching model of ESA is not necessarily in the normal procedure, but much more flexible. So the E-S-A can be transformed into E-A-S, A-E-S or even E-A-E-S-A, etc. Which procedure needs to be followed depends on the teaching topic and time limitation.

So is the ESA model really suitable for our study? Will it motivate students and further improve their cross-cultural communication ability? Our study tries to test the efficiency of ESA used in teaching Chinese intangible cultural heritage for college students, through the comparison between ESA and the traditional method.

### 3 Study Design

#### 3.1 Questions

In order to test the efficiency of ESA, the questions are listed as follows:

(1)Compared with the traditional method, will ESA significantly make students more satisfied with cultural teaching?

(2)Compared with the traditional method, will ESA significantly be better to improve students’ cross-cultural communication ability?

#### 3.2 Objectives

63 college students are chosen randomly for the study. Among them, 33 is in the experimental group(EAS model involved), while 30 is in the control group(traditional method involved). Both groups are in the same major with the similar environment, taught by the same teacher. From the independent-samples test, the two groups are insignificantly different in the language test of previous semester( $p=0.651>0.05$ ).

#### 3.3 Teaching Procedure

The culture teaching lasts for 10 weeks, including the topics such as “Hui’an Female Dress”, “Folk Houses of Cai Family”, “Liyuan Opera”, “Nan Yin”, etc. The topics are concerned with different patterns of intangible cultural heritage, like the traditional music, opera, handicraft, etc.

For control group, the traditional method is adopted, which has been used in the pilot teaching at the beginning of the study.

For the experimental group, ESA teaching model is adopted. Now we cite the example of “Hui’an Female Dress” to illustrate how the whole procedure of ESA is used in a 90-minute class, as Table 1 shows:

Table 1. ESA used in the sample class “Hun’an Female Dress”

step	Teaching Content	Activity	Time	ESA
1	Picture presentation--- A typical picture of Hui’an women wearing traditional dress is presented. Students describe it briefly. 2) Video broadcasting--- A video about a Hui’an woman’s daily life is broadcast, about her work, shopping, praying in the temple, etc.	Question & Answer; Watch	5 min	E
2	Key point 1 in culture knowledge--- Hui’an women’s hairstyle. 2) related vocabulary(dustpan bun, etc) explained in various ways like translation, definition, picture or real object.	Explanation	10 min	S
3	Map presentation--- A map of Hui’an area is presented, in which Hui’an women’s residence zones are marked; students are required to point out	Question & Answer	5 min	E
4	Key point 2 in culture knowledge Hui’an women’s bamboo hat. 2) related vocabulary(tung oil, etc) explained in various ways like translation, definition, picture or real object.	explanation	10 min	S
5	Game--- Several pictures of bamboo hats are presented for students to match with the Hui’an women in different residence zones	Question & Answer	5 min	E
6	Discussion---students discuss differences between two hats, and are selected or volunteer to report.	Interaction	15 min	A
7	Key point 3 in culture knowledge Hui’an women’s saving blouse. 2) related vocabulary(sleeve, etc) explained in various ways like translation, definition, picture or real object.	explanation	10 min	S
8	Discussion---students discuss about why Hui’an women feel happy to expose the navel with the short blouse, and are selected or volunteer to report.	Interaction	15 min	A
9	Video--- A video clip about a dance by a Hui’an woman is broadcast.	Watch	5 min	E
10	Role-play--- Students work in groups of 3~4, in which 1~2 members play the role of guide, and the others play the role of foreign visitors. The guides introduce Hu’an female dress to the visitors.	interaction	10 min	E

## 4 Data Collection and Analysis

### 4.1 Data Collection

The methods of questionnaires, testing and written interview are utilized in our study.

Questionnaire 1 is “The survey of students’ level of satisfaction to the culture teaching”, adopting the 5-point Likert Scale. “totally approved” is 5 points, while “totally disapproved” is 1 point. The items cover the whole process of culture teaching, including “introduction”, “knowledge explanation”, “vocabulary explanation”, “interaction between teacher and students”, “interaction between students”, and “Summary and assignment”. For example, item 1 is designed as “I was satisfied with the introduction in the culture teaching”, and item 4 is “I was satisfied with the interactions between the students in the culture teaching”.

Questionnaire 2 is “The survey of Students’ attitude to cross-cultural communication”, also adopting the Likert scale. The 6 items are concerned with students’ attitude about “ethnic centrism”, “culture relativity”, “cultivating one’s curiosity and appreciation ability toward different cultures”, etc. For example, item 1 is designed as “I think Chinese culture at an advantage compared with foreign cultures”, and item 3 is “I think there are so-called good or bad cultures”.

The testing includes two forms: written and oral. The 100-point written test is to assess students’ ability in acquiring the culture knowledge and vocabulary, with 25 items of T/F and 25 items of vocabulary translation. All these items are based on the five topics in the culture teaching and each topic includes 10 items respectively, which strengthens the validity of the test.

The oral test is to assess students’ cross-cultural communication skills.

Each student is required to choose one of the five topics and play the role of guide to introduce the chosen intangible cultural heritage within 10 minutes. Students record their speeches by the cellphone and submit them online for assessment. The standards of assessment are mainly based on “whether the topic is fully introduced”, and then “whether speech is in an accurate and fluent way”.

The written interview is set at the end of questionnaire 2, with the purpose to allow students to make any comments on the culture teaching and suggestions to improve it. For example, students are required to answer questions like “in the culture teaching, which procedure is done quite well and which needs improving?”, “if you were the teacher, how to design a culture-oriented lesson?”, etc.

At the beginning of our study, all the questionnaires 1 & 2 and written & oral tests were put into use in a trial testing given to the 35 students in the pilot teaching. The Pearson correlation coefficient is high up to 0.802, 0.762, 0.712 and 0.781, based on the repeated testing, which guarantees the validity of the questionnaires and tests. After the study, all the data are collected to be processed by SPSS.

### 4.2 Data Analysis and Discussion

To answer question 1--- “Compared with the traditional method, will ESA significantly make students more satisfied with cultural teaching?”, the six elements like “introduction”, “knowledge explanation”, etc., are used as the dependent variables in the independent-sample test involving both the experimental group (EG) and control group (CG). The results are as followed:

Table 2 independent-sample test between experimental group(EG) and control group(CG) in the items of Questionnaire 1

Satisfaction level in different items of culture teaching	t	df	Sig. (two-tailed)	MD: (EG - CG)	Mean		Standard Deviation	
					EG	CG	EG	CG
introduction	3.317	61	.002	.81515	4.1818	3.3667	.91701	1.03335
knowledge explanation	2.955	61	.004	.71212	3.8788	3.1667	1.02340	.87428
vocabulary explanation	.338	61	.737	.07576	3.2424	3.1667	.90244	.87428
interaction between teacher and students	3.651	61	.001	.79697	3.6970	2.9000	.91804	.80301
interaction between students	4.758	61	.000	.98485	3.8182	2.8333	.84611	.79148
6. summary and assignment	-.145	61	.885	-.03030	3.3030	3.3333	.76994	.88409
All steps	5.642	61	.000	3.35455	22.1212	18.7667	2.65468	1.97717

As Table 2 shows, the item 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7 of the experimental group are significantly better than the control group ( $p=0.002/0.04/0.001/0.000/0.000/0.000<0.05$ ). Generally speaking, students are more satisfied with the culture teaching in ESA model compared with the traditional method. But as the table shows, experimental group and control group are not significantly different in item 3 and 6 ( $p=0.737/0.885>0.05$ ).

To answer question 2--- “Compared with the traditional method, will ESA significantly be better to improve students’ cross-cultural communication ability?”, the written tests of culture knowledge and vocabulary, students’ attitude toward cross-cultural communication in questionnaire 2, and oral test are all used as the dependent variables in the independent-sample test involving both the experimental group (EG) and control group (CG). The results are as followed:

Table3 independent-sample test between experimental group (EG) and control group (CG) in the written, oral tests and Questionnaire 2

Tests and questionnaire	t	df	Sig. (two-tailed)	MD (EG-CG)	Mean		Standard Deviation	
					EG	CG	EG	CG
Written test of knowledge	2.339	61	.023	3.90303	34.3030	30.4000	6.34668	6.89628
Written test of vocabulary	.988	61	.327	0.94545	35.8788	34.9333	3.53339	4.05933
Attitudes	6.175	61	.000	3.46061	21.0606	17.6000	2.52413	1.83077
Oral test	2.672	61	.010	14.18182	68.1818	54.0000	20.90744	22.24214

As Table 3 shows, the written test of culture knowledge, attitudes and oral test of the experimental group are significantly better than the control group ( $p=0.023/0.000/0.001<0.05$ ). Generally speaking, ESA model are significantly better to improve students' cross-cultural communication ability. But as the table shows, experimental group and control group are not significantly different in the written test of vocabulary ( $p=0.327>0.05$ ).

From the above, firstly ESA model makes students more satisfied with the intangible cultural heritage teaching than the traditional method, and, to great extent, solves the problems in the previous pilot culture teaching like students' absent-mindedness, unwillingness to participate, low motivation, etc. From the written interview, students in the experimental group make comments like "it's attractive that the teacher introduces various interesting videos at the beginning of the class. We are so involved in", "we are free to talk about our understanding to a certain heritage, which makes us speak the language more fluently and put theory into practice", and "the teacher always shows us pictures related to a certain culture knowledge, which quite impresses us", etc.

Secondly, ESA is significantly better to improve student's cross-cultural ability, including culture knowledge, correct attitudes towards cross-cultural communication, and cross-cultural communication skills. Since ESA model emphasizes the stimulating of students' motivation, making balance between language input and output, and more importantly, the interactions between teachers and students. This model is more probable to help students develop their interests in culture knowledge and apply the acquired knowledge and vocabulary into the authentic situations of the cross-cultural communication. This result is similar to the studies of Chang&Zhao(2012), Zheng&Li(2016) and Yang&Zhao(2018).

## 5. Further Questions Raised

Although ESA model has solved several problems we encountered in the pilot culture teaching, we, from the written interview, find some other problems which can't be easily spotted from the quantitative research methods used. For example, students make comments like "students should be required to preview the teaching materials before class, they need to join in the lesson with questions in mind", "maybe the PPT the teacher presents should contains translation of some difficult culture-oriented vocabulary, which allows students to easily grasp the useful expressions", "the assignments shouldn't be limited in the oral report, speech or presentation; the article-writing may be involved in the forms of individual or group work", etc. These problems, we think, can be improved in the next-round action research.

Meanwhile, some problems need our greater attention, because they have already become big obstacles in the practice of our culture teaching. For example, students comments like "teacher may try to teach online instead of in the normal class; I think both can be well blended", "I don't think online teaching of the culture is the better choice, since many students are not so self-disciplined without certain supervision", "maybe we should take a look at the corresponding cultural heritage in foreign countries, instead of focusing only on home culture", "I think the teacher should invite students to talk about the similar heritage in their hometowns, because a certain type of heritage may have different patterns in different areas", etc.

So, in the next round of action research, we may focus on the following two issues as follows: 1) Is it suitable to do the culture teaching online? If yes, how? 2) Should we pay attention as well to foreign cultures during the Chinese culture teaching? If yes, what is the proper portion of Chinese and foreign cultures?

## 6. Conclusion

To help college students acquire and further spread Chinese culture, we carry out a 12-week action research, with the samples of 98 college English learners by the methods of questionnaires, tests and interviews, to design a ESA teaching model based on Chinese intangible cultural heritage learning. The results are as follows: Compared with the traditional model, the ESA model better satisfies the learners in the culture teaching; furthermore, the ESA model can significantly improve the learners' cross-cultural communication ability, especially on the aspects of cultural knowledge and communicative skills. Lastly, two important study issues are raised for the next-round action research.

Since the samples in our study all come from a provincial university, whether the results and conclusion can be applied to other universities or students of different language ability is unsure. Meanwhile, the oral test to measure students' communication skill level is not in the authentic situation, so it may not fully evaluate the students' ability in real cross-cultural communication. All of these limitations should be paid attention to, and need our follow-up investigation and data-analysis in the near future.

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