

## How to Cultivate Students' Cultural Empathy Competence in English Teaching?

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### **Abstract**

*Cultural empathy means that in intercultural communication, the communicator consciously and willingly shifts from one's own cultural frame of reference and actively projects oneself in another cultural pattern, feeling, understanding and appreciating another culture, without abandoning one's own perspective on the situation, With the development of globalization, intercultural communication is becoming an indispensable part of people's daily life, Only through cultural empathy can both sides communicate effectively in intercultural communication. So cultural empathy competence directly affects intercultural communication.*

**Key Words:** cultural empathy; English teaching; cultivate; cross-cultural communication

### **Introduction:**

With the development of globalization, the relation among countries is becoming closer and closer, which gives people more opportunities to communicate with others from different countries. As a consequence, intercultural communication, which has been in existence for a long time, arises as a new research field, attracting more and more attention from the academic world abroad and at home. Meanwhile, cultural empathy, as a key element of successful intercultural communication, has received the favor of intercultural communication scholars.

### **1. Empathy**

#### **1.1 Definition**

Empathy is defined as understanding what others are feeling because you have experienced it yourself or can put yourself in their shoes. For example, "I know it's not easy to lose weight because I have faced the same problems myself." Merriam Webster defines empathy as "the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions: the ability to share someone else's feelings."

## 1.2 Empathy VS Sympathy

To understand empathy well, one also has to make clear the definition of sympathy, which is easy to get confused with that of empathy.

Sympathy is usually defined as acknowledging another person's emotional hardships and providing comfort and assurance. For example, trying to lose weight can often feel like an uphill battle. Merriam Webster defines empathy as "the feeling that you care about and are sorry about someone else's trouble, grief, misfortune, etc.; a feeling of support for something; a state in which different people share the same interests, opinions, goals, etc."

The feeling of sympathy emerges from the recognition that another person is suffering, in contrast to empathy, where the other person's pain or suffering is felt. A person expresses sympathy, but shares empathy. The empathic feeling may be brief, and the person feeling it is said to "put themselves in the other person's place."

Of the two, empathy is a deeper feeling, but sympathy can be just as honest and heartfelt. However, empathy can forge a deeper and more meaningful connection, thus serving as a bridge for greater communication between individuals or between a leader and his or her followers.

## 2. Cultural Empathy

With the rapid development of globalization, intercultural communication is becoming more and more popular in people's life. In order to achieve successful intercultural communication, empathy has been widely applied. As a consequence, cultural empathy has been gaining more and more attention in the academic world. Cultural empathy is defined as the capacity to imagine oneself in another's role within the context of one's own culture. In other words, it refers to the ability to imagine or experience something from another's frame of reference or worldview.

Yang Kun (2004) said that "Cultural empathy means that, in intercultural communication, the communicator consciously and willingly shifts from one's own cultural frame of reference and actively projects oneself in another cultural pattern, feeling, understanding and appreciating another culture, without abandoning one's own perspective on the situation. It is a state of affective transformation in which we transpose ourselves to the field of the other's cultural context."

## 3. The Cultivation of Cultural Empathy

With the recognition of the importance of cultural empathy in intercultural communication and second language learning, scholars, especially scholars at home have begun to do research on the cultivation of it. In this section, the need to cultivate cultural empathy is analyzed and then ways suggested by scholars to cultivate cultural empathy are listed.

### 3.1 The influence of cultural empathy on the cross-cultural communication

Cultural empathy is a product of cross-cultural communication and also has become an indispensable action strategy in the cross-cultural communication. In the cross-cultural communication, the key to the success or failure of the communication lies in whether cultural empathy can be effectively grasped understood and used. In the communication of different cultures the most important is to understand the

cultural differences and transform the way of thinking, make the right treatment for others' mental feelings on the cognitive basis resonate in emotions and melt into the cultural situation of the communicative objects. In this way, the smooth communication and exchange between the different cultural subjects can be achieved.

### **3.2 Ways to Cultivate Cultural Empathy**

To cultivate cultural empathy competence, there are two major emphases : one is the cultivation of communicators' cultural sensitiveness, the other being the improvement of communicators' cultural adaptation ability.

Cultural sensitiveness means being sensitive to the difference between one's native culture and the foreign culture and understanding the influence of these characteristics on one's own and others' behaviors. In intercultural communication, while appreciating the message conveyed through another kind of culture, with the influence of cultural environment and ways of thinking formed in the communicators tend to understand it consciously or unconsciously by the decoding method determined by their cultural background. Thus the message is chosen and changed by the communicators' needs, resulting in their different feelings and understandings of the same message. In order to shorten the distance between the communicators' feelings of the same message, to cultivate their cultural sensitiveness is necessary.

However, to cultivate one's cultural sensitiveness is not enough in order to cultivate his cultural empathy competence in that there is another important process in cultural empathy : cultural adaptation. Adaptation refers to the process of the reconstruction and transformation of individual cognitive structure when the external environment changes and the original cognitive structure can not assimilate the information provided in it. It is through such assimilation and adaptation that individuals achieve the equilibration with the environment around. Cultural adaptation is an important process of cultural empathy.

In second language teaching, to cultivate students' cultural sensitiveness and improve their cultural adaptation ability, the teacher Can apply the following methods :

#### **3.2.1. Combining language teaching with culture teaching**

With the introduction of the cultural background (including the history, traditions and customs, value systems, etc.), the explanation of culture-loaded words and phrases, the introduction of the origin of some idioms, old sayings and proverbs, students' cultural sensitiveness will be gradually cultivated SO that they will contrast the culture of the target language with the native culture and adapt to the target culture while communicating with its native speakers.

#### **3.2.2. Creating opportunities for students to communicate in English**

To improve students' cultural adaptation ability, experiencing real communication is very important.

#### **3.2.3. Encouraging students to appreciate movies and literatures**

A good English movie can embody the major elements in language learning such as tone and intonation, thinking patterns, feelings, etc. Through appreciating these movies and literatures, one can intuitively get to know the lifestyles, socio—cultural customs, protocols, thinking patterns and values of English—speaking countries. Thus his cross-cultural awareness can be improved, which contributes to the cultivation of his cultural sensitiveness.

#### 4. Conclusion

Cultural empathy is an effective way to achieve successful intercultural communication. It plays a very important role in second language learning. To some degree, it determines whether the final aim of learning a second language can be achieved, that is to achieve successful communication with its native speakers. It should be an integral part of teaching a second language to cultivate and improve learners' cultural empathy competence.

This thesis has probed into the correlation between students' cultural empathy competence and their reading comprehension, explored the possible ways to cultivate and improve college students' cultural empathy competence and investigated whether students' reading comprehension can be improved through the cultivation and improvement of their cultural empathy competence.

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