

An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Intercultural Communication Competence Development: A Comparative Study of English and Japanese

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Abstract. This paper explores the differences in intercultural communication competence (ICC) development between English and Japanese majors within China's higher education system. Through a comparative analysis of their cultivation objectives, curricula, teaching methods, and assessment systems, the study identifies distinct characteristics and limitations in the approaches of each major. While English majors emphasize broad cultural knowledge and critical thinking, Japanese majors concentrate on in-depth cultural understanding and language etiquette. The findings indicate that future research and teaching practices should integrate the strengths of both majors to enhance ICC development and address globalized demands.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication Competence; English Majors; Japanese Majors; Higher Education; Comparative Analysis.

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization in higher education, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has become a crucial focus in developing talent for foreign language majors. The emphasis on enhancing intercultural communicative competence has increased in China's higher education foreign language classrooms. In 2018, the Ministry of Education officially included Intercultural Communicative Competence in the National Standard for Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Programs in General Institutions of Higher Education, which serves as a guide for cultivating talent in foreign language majors.

In the area of developing intercultural communicative competence, various majors have conducted extensive research and practical exploration. English and Japanese, the two predominant foreign language majors at universities, demonstrate significant differences in their methods of promoting intercultural communicative competence due to variations in language characteristics, cultural backgrounds, and teaching approaches. A thorough analysis of these differences is crucial for enhancing the quality of instruction in foreign language majors and fostering students' intercultural communicative competence. Yao Yanling (2017) noted that Japanese majors tend to display more positive intercultural attitudes but are relatively weaker in language proficiency, while English majors benefit from greater sociolinguistic competence and intercultural awareness. By comparing and analyzing how English and Japanese majors cultivate intercultural communicative competence, one can easily identify their respective strengths and weaknesses, thereby providing valuable insights for foreign language education.

This paper aims to examine the differences between English and Japanese majors in talent cultivation within China's higher education system, analyze their unique characteristics in developing intercultural communication skills, and propose growth pathways and future trends for each major. This will assist foreign language majors in cultivating more versatile talents to meet contemporary demands and enhance effective cross-cultural communication and collaboration.

2. Theoretical Development of ICC

The definition of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) has been extensively studied and debated by scholars both nationally and internationally; however, there is still no complete

consensus on its meaning within the academic community. For example, Byram (1997) suggested that ICC includes four dimensions: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and intercultural competence. Intercultural competence, in turn, is further divided into skills, knowledge, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness. Nevertheless, Kim (2001) argued that ICC consists of cognitive, behavioral, and affective competence, emphasizing that these three dimensions are interrelated, mutually influential, and inseparable, with each impacting the others and remaining interconnected.

The connotation of ICC encompasses various fields and disciplines, extending well beyond linguistics. Zhuang Enping (2006) noted that language research is just one branch of intercultural communication studies, and language, as a form of communication, is merely one of the many ways to achieve effective intercultural communication and fulfill intercultural tasks. Building on this, Yang Ying and Zhuang Enping (2007) developed a framework for ICC in foreign language education. This framework includes four main competence systems: global awareness, cultural adjustment skills, communicative practice abilities, and cultural knowledge, which aim to facilitate effective communication and achieve specific communicative objectives through ICC. Hu Wenzhong (2013) further defined ICC as the ability to communicate and interact effectively and appropriately with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in a cross-cultural setting. This definition includes not only linguistic competence but also sensitivity to cultural differences, as well as tolerance and flexibility in addressing those differences. Hu Wenzhong (2013) also proposed that cultivating ICC should be integrated into higher education socio-cultural programs to enhance learners' overall quality. By summarizing expert interviews, Pan Yaling (2008) argues that the core of intercultural competence lies in the ability to view both one's own and foreign cultures from multiple perspectives, thereby fostering positive attitudes toward foreign cultures and new cultural paradigms. Specifically, intercultural competence involves respect for foreign cultures and their values, thought processes, and behavioral patterns. She further emphasized that intercultural competence should be nurtured throughout the lifelong learning journey, as both cultures evolve dynamically, requiring learners to continuously update their intercultural knowledge and skills to navigate an increasingly complex intercultural communication environment.

These studies reveal the multidimensional nature and dynamics of intercultural communicative competence, providing an essential theoretical foundation and practical guidance for foreign language instruction and intercultural education. The implications of intercultural communicative competence are extensive and varied, with research perspectives gradually broadening from singular language competence to multidimensional skills such as cultural sensitivity, cultural adaptability, and global awareness. Ongoing research in this field has continually deepened, offering theoretical support and practical insights for fostering ICC in various contexts.

3. Cultivating ICC: Current Status and Perspectives Literature References

In the field of ICC cultivation research, the theoretical contributions of foreign scholars demonstrate a more advanced development to some extent. However, this maturity comes with certain aspects that warrant deeper exploration and critique. On one hand, foreign scholars have thoroughly examined the multidimensional characteristics and dynamic evolution of ICC, marking significant progress in intercultural research. For instance, Kramsch (1997, 2003) argues that language instruction should shift from merely honing language skills to fostering cultural awareness, emphasizing the enhancement of students' comprehensive understanding of the target culture through literary works and cultural context introductions, among other methods, to improve ICC. While this perspective is enlightening at a theoretical level, it may face practical challenges, such as subjectivity in cultural content selection, one-dimensionality in cultural presentation, and the depth and breadth of integrating culture with language teaching. Additionally, Lo Bianco et al. (1999) introduced the concept of creating an intercultural "third space," which advocates for establishing a multicultural environment in teaching and learning, allowing students to practice communication in

simulated intercultural scenarios to support the development of intercultural identity and communicative competence. This concept is commendable for its theoretical innovation; nonetheless, practical implementation raises questions about ensuring the authenticity and effectiveness of the “third space” and preventing students from misinterpreting intercultural communication due to the limitations of simulated contexts, necessitating further investigation and validation.

On the other hand, while these theoretical models lay a foundation for further research and clarify the components and development paths of intercultural communicative competence, they still fall short in addressing the universality of cultural backgrounds, the dynamics of cultural identity, and the transferability of intercultural communicative competence. For instance, many theoretical models are often rooted in a Western cultural context, which may limit their applicability in enhancing intercultural communicative competence in other cultural environments. Additionally, by emphasizing the dynamic development of intercultural competence, these models frequently overlook the influence of individual differences on the evolution, transferability, and adaptability of intercultural communicative competence across various cultural contexts. Therefore, when engaging with foreign theoretical models, it is crucial to critically evaluate their cultural backgrounds, theoretical assumptions, and practical applications to ensure their relevance and effectiveness in diverse cultural settings.

4. Differences in Cultivating ICC between English and Japanese Majors

4.1 Differences in the Objectives of Developing ICC

There are differences in the objectives for cultivating ICC within China's higher education system for English and Japanese majors. Specifically, the English Syllabus for English Majors in Colleges and Universities (2000) states that the goal of nurturing ICC for English majors is to provide students with a solid foundation in the English language, an understanding of the cultures of English-speaking countries, and the ability to engage in international exchanges and cross-cultural research. This will enable English majors to develop into well-rounded college students with a proficient command of English and extensive cultural knowledge, skilled in using English effectively in translation, teaching, management, and research across various fields such as foreign affairs, education, economics and trade, science and technology, and the military. English majors should cultivate cross-cultural communication skills and be adept at addressing communication differences in diverse cultural contexts (Sun Youzhong 2011). Establishing this goal offers a clear direction for English teaching majors.

The goal of training in ICC for Japanese language majors is to develop well-rounded individuals with a solid foundation in both the Japanese language and intercultural communication. These individuals should be equipped to engage in Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges and business activities, effectively serving as a bridge between China and Japan. The Teaching Guidelines for Japanese Language Majors in Undergraduate Programs at General Colleges of Higher Education clearly state that students in Japanese language programs should have cross-cultural communication skills and be prepared to navigate the cultural differences between China and Japan.

4.2 Differences in Curricula

There is a clear distinction in the curriculum between English and Japanese majors. English majors generally offer more comprehensive intercultural courses, while Japanese majors focus on developing language skills. For instance, a study by Zhang Yingwen and Fu Lifang (2021) found that 70.04% of English majors were exposed to cross-cultural content through foreign courses, and 54.9% had enrolled in the Intercultural Communication course. These courses systematically covered various aspects of European and American culture, helping students build a more comprehensive intercultural knowledge system.

In contrast, the intercultural knowledge of Japanese majors is often fragmented across elective courses such as Overview of Japan. Wang Huixin and Li Jiannan (2020) noted that Japanese majors who took the Introduction to Intercultural Communication course showed significant improvement in their situational adaptation skills, although they still lagged behind English majors in the depth and breadth of their cultural knowledge. Furthermore, due to the global prevalence of the English language, English majors offer more cross-cultural courses related to international business, diplomacy, and science and technology, aiming to enhance students' cross-cultural communication skills in various professional fields. Japanese majors, however, concentrate more on Japanese-related areas like business and tourism, resulting in a more targeted curriculum but with comparatively narrower coverage.

4.3 Variations in Instructional Methods

Regarding pedagogical approaches, English and Japanese majors exhibit distinct characteristics. The education of English majors emphasizes the development of critical thinking skills, while Japanese majors concentrate more on the dissemination of cultural knowledge. For instance, Hu Wenzhong (2008) proposed that English majors should be cultivated into elite professionals with a solid linguistic foundation, profound humanistic literacy, and a thorough understanding of the history, culture, and literature of English-speaking countries. Additionally, they should foster critical thinking skills and an innovative mindset. Such individuals tend to demonstrate a high level of adaptability and can assume various professional roles with minimal training. In the instructional process, English majors generally prefer utilizing case studies and group discussions to assist students in analyzing and solving practical issues in cross-cultural communication, thus enhancing their strategies and adaptability in this field.

In contrast, the teaching methods for Japanese language majors emphasize imparting cultural knowledge. A study by Zhong Hua et al. (2013) found that Japanese students often lack strategic competence, particularly the ability to explain vocabulary in lengthy sentences. Furthermore, to align Japanese language instruction with the cultural focus on etiquette and implicit expression, teachers often prioritize fostering students' politeness and understanding of etiquette norms in various contexts. By simulating scenarios from Japanese life, students can better appreciate and effectively apply what they have learned about both the language and its cultural practices.

4.4 Variations in Assessment Systems

When assessing talent competency, English and Japanese majors focus on different aspects. The evaluation system for English majors emphasizes a comprehensive examination of students' intercultural communication skills, gauging their language proficiency and cultural adaptability across various contexts through research essays, group discussions, and debate performances. For instance, Sun Youzhong (2011) argued that the evaluation for English majors should enhance critical thinking skills and thoroughly assess students' intercultural communicative competence through writing research mini-essays, participating in group discussions, and engaging in debates.

The assessment system for Japanese majors, in contrast, places greater emphasis on the comprehensive evaluation of students' intercultural communicative competence. It assesses students' language use and cultural adaptability in intercultural communication through simulated tests of Sino-Japanese cultural interactions, performance in Sino-Japanese business negotiations, and written Japanese essays. For example, the ICC Assessment Scale, developed by Yuan Wang and Yuexiu Lin (2022) for Japanese language majors, evaluates students across five dimensions: intercultural attitudes, cultural knowledge and language output, management of interpersonal relationships with Japan, international perspective, and assertiveness in foreign contexts. Furthermore, Jin Yuhua, and Fan Meng (2022) examined the changes in respondents' intercultural communicative competence across three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral, through questionnaire surveys and PAC analyses of Japanese language majors who studied abroad.

5. Summary

By systematically comparing the cultivation of ICC among English and Japanese majors, this paper highlights significant differences between the two regarding cultivation objectives, curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment systems. The English major emphasizes developing students' critical thinking and intercultural communication strategy skills through a comprehensive curriculum that includes a wide range of cultural knowledge, various teaching methods, and assessment practices designed to evaluate overall abilities. In contrast, the Japanese major focuses on in-depth instruction in cultural knowledge and language expression etiquette, offering a more targeted curriculum, while the assessment system prioritizes a thorough evaluation of students' intercultural communication skills.

These differences highlight the teaching characteristics and talent development needs of both languages and cultures. The English major's international perspective and multicultural background promote a broader development of intercultural communication skills, while the Japanese major's focused approach enables students to serve as a bridge in Sino-Japanese communication. However, the cultivation methods for these two majors also exhibit certain limitations. For example, English majors may lack depth in cultural knowledge, whereas Japanese majors still have opportunities to enhance their cross-cultural strategic skills and critical thinking.

Future research and teaching practices should aim to achieve complementary benefits in developing intercultural communicative competence among English and Japanese majors. English majors, on one hand, can deepen their understanding of specific cultural backgrounds to enhance their cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Conversely, Japanese majors can provide more training in critical thinking and cross-cultural strategies to broaden students' international perspectives. Additionally, both majors should improve the assessment system to better reflect students' intercultural communicative competence and offer strong support for nurturing well-rounded foreign language skills that meet the challenges of globalization.

This paper systematically sorts and analyzes the current state of cultivating ICC among English and Japanese majors through literature research. However, existing studies still have certain limitations. Future research should further utilize empirical methods, such as surveys, interviews, and case studies, to gather richer data and evidence, thus enhancing the understanding and exploration of this field.

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