

The Importance of Cultural Understanding: How to Incorporate Culture into the Teaching of French as a Second Foreign Language with the Example of Chinese University Beginners

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Abstract:

Teaching French as a second foreign language in Chinese universities has a long history of more than 160 years. Despite this historical legacy, there is still a need to strengthen the integration of French culture into language teaching in order to improve students' language proficiency and intercultural competence. This essay examines the current situation of French language teaching, the impact of cultural learning on language proficiency and intercultural competence, and effective ways of integrating culture into language teaching. Through an analysis of existing literature and empirical studies, this study examines the challenges and opportunities of cultural integration and makes practical recommendations for educators and policymakers. The findings suggest that although French language teaching in Chinese universities emphasizes grammatical aspects, more attention must be paid to cultural learning to improve language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence. Universities can enrich students' cultural understanding and language competence by encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration, using multimedia resources, and promoting experiential learning. In addition, teacher training and clear assessment criteria are essential to ensure the effective implementation of cultural teaching and learning activities. Ultimately, this essay contributes to the development of language education by advocating a holistic approach that prioritizes cultural immersion and experiential learning. Educators can empower students to become proficient French speakers and culturally sensitive learners through collaborative efforts and innovative pedagogical practices, contributing to a more inclusive and interconnected society.

Keywords: French; culture; second foreign language; pedagogics; intercultural competence.

1. Introduction:

The teaching of French in China began in 1850 with the founding of the Zi-Ka-Wei College and in 1863 with the opening of the French Department at the School of Combined Learning, with a history of more than 160 years [1]. The teaching of French has been uninterrupted in Chinese university education. Nowadays, the world is so closely interconnected that mastering a foreign language has become necessary for academic and professional success. Developing intercultural competence has also become a primary goal of language teaching [2]. With the increasing importance of French in international communication and cross-cultural understanding, many Chinese university students have started to choose French as their second foreign language (L2) to learn, in addition to English as their first foreign language (L1). For the learners of a foreign language, it is important to understand not only the target language itself but also the cultural differences between

the target language and one's mother tongue [3], and cultural knowledge in the target language area is crucial to the development of intercultural competence [2] because culture is the sum of the spiritual and material wealth created in the course of the development of human society, as well as the sum of ideas and material things [4].

Also, there has been growing recognition of the importance of cultural competency in foreign language education in recent years. Understanding the target language's cultural context improves language proficiency and develops intercultural competence and global awareness. However, in teaching French as L2 in Chinese universities, the focus is more on the grammatical aspects while neglecting the importance of cultural learning for improving language proficiency.

Also, regarding effective methods to teach French culture to Chinese university students, most existing literature focuses on grammar and language proficiency, with less

attention paid to the cultural dimension of language education. Therefore, this essay seeks to investigate the integration of French culture into teaching French as a second language, especially for beginners among Chinese university students. This essay aims to explore the role of cultural content in French language teaching and its impact on the learning outcomes of beginning French speakers in Chinese universities. This essay will focus on the incorporation of French cultural elements in discussions, such as history, literature, art, cuisine, and social customs, into the language curriculum; it will also analyze a variety of French language teaching methods and draw out the strengths and limitations of each and analyses the actual French class situation of Chinese university students to understand the specific needs of students when they first learn French. This essay will elucidate how cultural immersion can enhance beginner students' linguistic and cultural proficiency because language and culture are intrinsically intertwined. Proficiency in a language depends not only on grammar rules and vocabulary memorization but also on a deep understanding of the cultural nuances and contextual meanings embedded in that language.

Ultimately, the findings of this essay will contribute to the development of culturally enriched French language curricula and pedagogical practices tailored to the needs of Chinese university students who are beginning to learn French. While improving students' language proficiency, educators can also refer to this essay to promote a deeper understanding of French culture, thus enabling them to become proficient and culturally literate in French and integrate naturally into the global Francophone region.

2. The Current Status of French as L2 in Chinese Universities

French as a second foreign language has been taught in Chinese universities for some time; however, the current teaching status may vary somewhat from school to school. In China's university education system, teaching French as a second foreign language is usually offered as an elective or minor course. A part of language-oriented universities will teach French as a special major. Taking the Dalian University of Foreign Languages as an example, the objectives of French teaching mainly include cultivating students' communicative ability, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The teaching content mainly includes the study of phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, and basic sentence patterns, focusing on mastering the basic linguistic structure and expressive ability of French. Most students of Languages or Foreign Languages and Literature are beginners in the target language. They are awarded a Bachelor's degree after completing a four-year undergraduate program and related courses(Elementary,

intermediate, and advanced French; Interpretation and translation courses; Composition and audio-visual courses; Literature; Business, Tourism, and Law courses, etc.) [5]. In terms of teaching methods, the traditional grammar-translation method still dominates. The content of the textbooks does cover cultural aspects, but simply understanding the culture of the target language is not enough. Students need to be able to fully understand the culture of the target language and, at the same time, strengthen their understanding of their own culture to better achieve intercultural communication. According to relevant studies, French-language textbooks contain a relatively small amount of cultural studies compared to English-language textbooks. Studies have shown that while French textbooks focus on multiculturalism, they focus primarily on local French-speaking cultures, with little coverage of the cultural content of other French-speaking regions and minimal content on Sino-French cultural exchanges [6]. At the same time, many of the texts in the textbooks deal with themes that are too old and outdated to be relevant to today's situation and have lost their value as references.

Teachers' and students' awareness of teaching French and their knowledge of France are important factors affecting the effectiveness of French teaching. To ensure the timely completion of teaching tasks, teachers focus on explaining and analyzing French vocabulary, sentence patterns, parts of speech, and other relevant knowledge. This includes teaching an overview of French culture, but it lacks an analysis of the connotations of French culture and the cultivation of students' intercultural communication skills [7]. They are unable to enable students to fully understand and integrate into French culture. As far as the students are concerned, most of them have a positive attitude toward teaching French. Still, they have a relatively low understanding of French culture and a limited knowledge of French society, history, and culture. This is an obstacle to the learning of French. Even though they have learned a lot of grammar and vocabulary, they cannot respond to appropriate occasions and lack the practical skills to apply them well in practice. Therefore, it is of great significance to strengthen teachers' and students' understanding of French culture to improve the quality of French teaching.

In the current French teaching, cultural teaching also faces some problems and difficulties. Firstly, due to the limited teaching time and curriculum, cultural teaching is often marginalized and cannot be fully valued and developed. Secondly, some teachers have insufficient preparation and teaching design for cultural teaching and lack relevant teaching resources. In addition, students' learning interests and needs may also affect the effectiveness of cultural teaching, and there is a need to further stimulate students' enthusiasm and interest in learning. Therefore,

there is a need to pay more attention to cultural teaching and provide more support in finding channels for teaching resources and enhancing students' participation and feedback to improve the effectiveness and impact of cultural teaching.

3. The Effect of Cultural Learning on University Students' Language Proficiency and Intercultural Competence

To grasp the profound impact of cultural learning on university students' language and intercultural competence, it is necessary to delve into the intricate and dynamic relationship between cultural understanding and language acquisition.

Cultural understanding is the cornerstone of language proficiency, providing a contextual framework that infuses depth and meaning into linguistic expression. By immersing themselves in the intricacies of the target language's culture, students can move beyond mere vocabulary memorization and grasp the nuances of language use. For example, understanding the cultural significance of French greetings allows students to master subtle vocabulary and social etiquette to navigate different social interactions. This holistic approach to language learning promotes a symbiotic relationship between cultural enrichment and language mastery, empowering students to communicate fluently and authentically.

In addition, cultural knowledge not only enriches language learning but also enhances the use of language in the real world. When students develop a nuanced understanding of the cultural norms and practices inherent in the target language, they become proficient in adapting their language use to different social situations. Whether in casual or formal conversations, culturally adapted students can seamlessly integrate linguistic expressions with cultural nuances, thus enhancing their communicative competence. A study on the acculturation of Chinese students in Indonesia found that students who had prior experience in Indonesia exhibited greater adaptability in communication, higher levels of life satisfaction, better mental health, and improved learning abilities compared to those who had not been to Indonesia. These results suggest that exposure to cultural experiences can provide advantages in cultural adaptation [8]. Similarly, in the study of French, universities can organize French students to go to France for short-term study exchanges during holidays, for example, using summer camps. Or they can strengthen their links with French universities and send exchange students on a regular basis. This will enable students to better understand French culture and integrate into it, promote the dissemination of Chinese culture to the outside world, and better realize cultural exchange and cultural adaptation.

In addition, cultural instruction promotes a paradigm shift in students' motivation and learning strategies. The attitudes of teachers towards the target language have a direct impact on themselves and their teaching and also have an indirect impact on their students [9]. The teacher's teaching methods can help students better understand the target language's culture and improve their language skills, thus increasing their confidence in learning the language. As students' understanding of the cultural connotations of the language deepens, their intrinsic learning motivation will surge, pushing them to devote themselves to language learning with greater enthusiasm. For example, universities can use a combination of foreign and Chinese teachers for teaching. Through subtle influence, foreign teachers can provide students with a better language environment and improve their language skills. They have more cultural resources, which can be better introduced to students. Foreign teachers can add more interactive forms in the classroom, such as role-playing and other forms of simulation of real communication situations, so that students have a sense of immersive experience, which can help them use the language better in real life. At the same time, Chinese tutors can help students to solve problems in learning French more quickly. Students can use their mother language to communicate with the Chinese tutor to understand the points they don't understand more quickly and then put them to better use in the foreign teacher's class. In addition, cultural immersion fosters a flexible and adaptive approach to learning, prompting students to explore new strategies and techniques to improve their language skills. This newfound curiosity and spirit of exploration not only improve language skills but also foster empathy and cross-cultural sensitivity in students, thus building a more inclusive and interconnected international society.

In summary, cultural learning is the key to developing language proficiency and intercultural competence in university students. Recognizing the inextricable link between cultural understanding and language acquisition, educators can design integrated language programs that prioritize authentic cultural immersion and experiential learning. By working together to foster cultural curiosity and intercultural dialogue, universities can empower students to become culturally literate communicators who can thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

4. The Effective Methods to Integrate Culture into French Language Teaching to Create a More Natural Language Environment

Successful language learners learn the target language's culture alongside the language itself. Therefore, language

and culture teaching are inseparable [10]. Therefore, the effective integration of culture into French teaching is essential to create a natural language environment conducive to an immersive learning experience. Teachers should teach language instead of considering it as only a collection of grammar and vocabulary but also an extension of many aspects of life in which the whole person is involved [10]. For this reason, this section of the thesis will analyze the different pedagogical approaches and how teachers should effectively teach culture to improve their students' language skills.

Different pedagogical approaches have their strengths and limitations, and each has the potential to provide theoretical justification and support for cultural integration. Before discussing pedagogy, the importance of language learning must be clear because all the pedagogies serve the purpose of language learning, which is ultimately to enable language learners to learn the target language better. Language learning has the potential to immerse students in the world of others, fostering empathy and understanding across social and political divides. However, this can only be achieved if research and teaching fully consider the language and culture behind it [10]. From traditional textbook-based approaches to innovative multimedia resources and experiential learning activities, educators need to carefully evaluate the appropriateness of these approaches for beginning university students. Traditional teaching methods, such as lectures and textbooks, provide a structured approach to language learning, emphasizing grammar rules and vocabulary. While these methods are effective for direct instruction, they lack cultural immersion and do not allow students to practically apply what they have learned. Teaching methods such as multimedia resources and cultural activities can provide a degree of dynamic engagement with students, exposing them to authentic contexts and deepening their cultural understanding. However, the existence of such interactivity is based on a certain linguistic foundation, so the learning of grammar and vocabulary cannot be completely ignored. Teachers need to plan their teaching methods to identify more effective programs and use a combination of traditional and modern methods to create a complete language learning experience that improves language skills while enriching students' cultural understanding.

Furthermore, the teacher's role in transmitting culture cannot be overemphasized. Teachers are ambassadors who transmit culture and guide students through the intricacies of French culture and language. Given the multifaceted nature of cultural integration, teachers can benefit from targeted training in curriculum design, lesson planning, and materials selection to integrate French culture into the language classroom effectively. By equipping teach-

ers with the necessary pedagogical skills and cultural knowledge, universities can ensure that cultural content is seamlessly integrated into the language program, thereby enriching students' learning experience.

With this in mind, this essay offers several practical suggestions to improve the integration of culture in French language teaching. Firstly, universities could encourage interdisciplinary collaboration with disciplines such as history, literature, and the arts, and it can provide authentic cultural resources such as films, literary works, and news reports that enrich students' understanding of language use and cultural nuances, which could also contribute to the development of interdisciplinary cultural modules or projects. In addition, collaboration with cultural organizations, the French Embassy, or the French-speaking community can provide students with valuable opportunities for authentic cultural immersion and practical language application. These can provide a wealth of resources, such as cultural events, exhibitions, or seminars by native French speakers. Students can interact directly with French speakers, practice their language skills in an authentic environment, and gain first-hand insights into French culture. These organizations can also facilitate exchange programs, study trips, and internships in French-speaking regions, providing students with valuable experience and improving their language skills and intercultural competence. In short, such cooperation can enrich students' learning experience by providing them with authentic cultural encounters and a deeper understanding of the French language and culture.

Second, in addition to activities such as the cultural tours mentioned above, innovative teaching strategies can incorporate game elements into the class, further increasing student interest and interactivity and creating a dynamic learning environment.

Finally, to assess students' linguistic and cultural competence, it is essential to develop clear learning objectives and assessment criteria. Assessing students' cultural competence alongside their linguistic competence allows educators to identify differences in cultural competence and sensitivity and to adjust teaching strategies accordingly. By using an integrated assessment approach, universities can ensure that students not only master the French language but also develop a nuanced understanding of French culture.

In summary, the effective integration of culture into the French language classroom requires a multifaceted approach that includes a variety of pedagogical methods, teacher training, and practical advice. By adopting these strategies, universities can foster rich and immersive learning environments and equip students with the linguistic and cultural skills necessary for globalization and

intercultural communication.

5. Conclusion

This essay discusses the importance of integrating French culture into teaching French as a second foreign language in Chinese universities and realizing the integration of Chinese and French cultures in exchange and learning. French has been taught in Chinese universities for more than 160 years, and although it continues to develop, the challenge of effectively integrating cultural elements into language teaching remains. This study provides an important reference for educators and policymakers by exploring the current status of French language teaching, the impact of cultural learning on language proficiency and intercultural competence, and effective ways to integrate culture into language teaching. It also provides practical suggestions for beginners at the university level for learning French.

The analyses show that French language teaching in Chinese universities needs to pay more attention to cultural learning while emphasizing grammar to improve language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence. The different levels of knowledge and understanding of French culture among teachers and students highlight the importance of strengthening cultural education to improve the quality of French language teaching.

In response to these findings, this essay offers several practical recommendations to enhance cultural integration in teaching French. These recommendations include promoting interdisciplinary collaboration, using multimedia resources, and promoting experiential learning to enrich students' cultural understanding and linguistic competence. In addition, this essay emphasizes teacher training and clear assessment criteria to ensure effective implementation and evaluation of cultural teaching and learning activities.

In terms of outcomes, this thesis contributes to the literature on language education by highlighting the intrinsic link between cultural understanding and language proficiency. This study provides viable ideas on how universities can develop culturally literate communicators who thrive in a globalized world

by advocating a holistic approach to language teaching and learning that focuses on cultural immersion and experiential learning.

In conclusion, this essay highlights the importance of integrating culture into French language teaching and learning to create a more natural language environment

and improve students' linguistic and cultural competence. By addressing the challenges and opportunities of cultural integration, universities can better prepare students for academic and professional success in a globalized society. Through collaborative efforts and innovative pedagogical practices, educators can empower students to become proficient, culturally sensitive learners of French, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and interconnected society.

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