

# Integrating Ideological Education With Competency Cultivation: Teaching Practices for an Intercultural Communication Course Under the New Liberal Arts Background

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This study investigates how to pedagogically integrate ideological education with competency development in the Intercultural Communication course, a challenge arising from China's dual reform contexts of the New Liberal Arts initiative and the national curriculum ideology policy. As global interactions intensify, cultivating foreign language professionals who possess both firm cultural confidence and sophisticated intercultural competence have become a critical educational imperative. This exploratory study investigates how a three-dimensional "Value-Knowledge-Competency" framework can guide the redesign of course content, task design, and assessment to achieve organic fusion. Drawing on qualitative data from a case study, it analyzes specific implementation pathways, synthesizes teacher and student feedback, and discusses the resultant challenges and broader implications for foreign language curriculum reform. The findings suggest that such an integrated approach can effectively synergize value guidance with skill cultivation, though its success hinges on overcoming issues related to pedagogical naturalness, resource allocation, and standardized evaluation.

*Keywords:* New Liberal Arts, ideological-political education, Intercultural Communication, teaching practice, integrated framework

## Introduction

The Intercultural Communication course in Chinese higher education faces a dual imperative: to cultivate globally competent communicators as demanded by the New Liberal Arts initiative, and to embed ideological-political education as mandated by national policy (Zhang, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2020). This creates a central pedagogical challenge: how to achieve an organic fusion of value guidance (ideological education) and competency development within the existing curriculum framework. Previous approaches risked either mechanical addition of political content or neglect of cultural confidence building. To address this gap, we propose and investigate a practical "Value-Knowledge-Competency" integrative framework, analyzing its implementation in a specific course case, and evaluating its effectiveness and challenges. The study seeks to

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provide evidence-based pathways for meaningful curriculum reform that meets contemporary educational and societal needs.

### **Literature Review**

The New Liberal Arts initiative reframes foreign language education, demanding interdisciplinary integration and the nurturing of talents with both Chinese perspective and global vision (Lai, 2022). This shifts the focus of courses like Intercultural Communication from mere skill acquisition to fostering critical cultural interpreters. Concurrently, research on integrating ideological-political education into foreign language teaching has advanced. Key strategies identified include curriculum content rebalancing to incorporate Chinese cultural perspectives (Wen, 2022), innovative pedagogical designs, such as value-shaping tasks and flipped classrooms for deeper interaction (Ma & Wu, 2023), and reformed assessment models that evaluate both competence and value internalization (Yang, 2022). These practices, however, often remain siloed, addressing either content, method, or evaluation separately.

Building upon the existing yet siloed strategies reviewed above, our study introduces a three-dimensional “Value-Knowledge-Competency” framework designed to guide a more holistic course redesign. The Value dimension ensures cultural confidence and core socialist values underpin all activities. The Knowledge dimension requires a dialogic curriculum that juxtaposes Western theories (e.g., Hofstede) with Chinese concepts (e.g., “harmony in diversity”) and contemporary case studies. The Competency dimension focuses on developing practical skills for analysis, communication, and storytelling. Effective teaching is posited to occur at the intersection of these three axes, where a learning task (Competency) is rooted in balanced knowledge and consciously fosters a target value.

### **Method**

#### **Research Design and Context**

This study employed an exploratory, qualitative case study design. The research was conducted within a semester-long Intercultural Communication course offered at a comprehensive university in China. The course, which enrolled 42 third-year English majors, was selected due to its explicit recent redesign to align with New Liberal Arts and curriculum ideology goals. The course instructor was a senior lecturer with 15 years of experience, currently engaged in related pedagogical research.

#### **Data Collection**

To ensure data triangulation and richness, we employed a multi-method approach to data collection. Interviews were conducted: a 60-minute semi-structured interview with the course instructor, and two 45-minute focus group discussions with students (six students per group). Questions focused on perceptions of the integrated teaching approach, specific task experiences, and perceived learning outcomes. Direct observation was carried out for four 90-minute class sessions, focusing on teacher-student interaction and task implementation. Documentary analysis was performed on the course syllabus, selected lesson plans, and samples of student assignments (e.g., reflection journals and project reports).

#### **Data Analysis**

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. A thematic analysis approach was adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial coding process was guided by the three dimensions of the theoretical

framework (value, knowledge, and competency). Transcripts, observation notes, and documents were iteratively reviewed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to the research questions. Codes were then categorized and synthesized into broader thematic findings, which are reported in the following section.

## Findings

### Teaching Integration Pathways

The instructor's practice operationalized the "Value-Knowledge-Competency" framework through three primary pathways.

First, in Content Reconstruction, a key strategy was facilitating Sino-Western Theoretical Dialogue. For instance, when teaching cultural dimensions, the instructor juxtaposed Hofstede's "Individualism vs. Collectivism" with the Chinese philosophical concepts of "collectivism" and "all people are my kin, all things are my companions", a term from the Terminology of Chinese Thought and Culture project. This was not presented as a dichotomy but as a dialogue, encouraging students to critique the universality of Western models and appreciate the ecological wisdom embedded in Chinese thought. One student noted in a focus group, "It made me realize our traditional concepts are not outdated but offer a different, perhaps more holistic, perspective on human relations" (Focus Group B). This approach directly addresses the call for balanced knowledge (Wen, 2022).

Second, in Task Design, the course featured a scaffolded "Cultural Narrative Project". This multi-week task required students to: (a) analyze the portrayal of a cultural value in a Western film (Knowledge), (b) identify a comparable value in a Chinese cultural product (e.g., a movie, novel, or folk tale), and (c) create a short video presentation aimed at a hypothetical foreign audience, explaining the Chinese value and its context (Competency). The instructor explicitly framed the task's goal as "telling Chinese stories well", thereby embedding the Value of cultural confidence. This aligns with the principle of designing tasks where value shaping is integral to the output. Student projects demonstrated a move from simple comparison to more nuanced interpretation, indicating competency development.

Third, in Assessment Reform, the instructor implemented a Diversified Portfolio. This included traditional quizzes on theoretical knowledge, but significant weight was given to reflective journals and the final project. The rubric for the Cultural Narrative Project included criteria, such as "Depth of Cultural Analysis" (Knowledge/Competency) and "Clarity and Conviction in Presenting Cultural Perspective" (Value/Competency). This mirrors the move towards practice-oriented assessment that evaluates both skill and attitude, as suggested by Yang (2022).

### Teacher and Student Feedback

Feedback revealed generally positive perceptions of the integrated model, though with nuanced insights.

The instructor reported a successful dual-goal achievement. "The framework helped me structure my class with clear dual threads. I wasn't just teaching 'what culture is', but also 'why our cultural perspective matters'", she stated. She noted a positive shift in her role from a "knowledge transmitter" to a "facilitator of cultural dialogue", a transition identified as crucial in flipped or student-centered models (Ma & Wu, 2023).

Students reported significant perspective shifts and enhanced identity. A recurring theme was the transition from a passive, receptive stance towards Western theory to a more active, critical, and appreciative stance towards

their own culture. “Before, I saw intercultural communication as learning foreign rules to avoid mistakes. Now, I see it as a two-way street where I also have something valuable to contribute”, shared one student (Focus Group A). This indicates progress in the Value dimension towards cultural confidence. Furthermore, students acknowledged the Competency gains, particularly in analytical skills and purposeful communication, finding the project-based task more engaging and practical than memorizing theories.

### **Implementation Challenges**

Despite positive outcomes, significant challenges emerged.

The foremost challenge was achieving “Seamless Integration”. The instructor admitted that in early sessions, connections between ideological elements and core content sometimes felt “tacked on”. This echoes a common pitfall in curriculum ideology implementation where fusion is mechanical rather than organic. Iterative design based on student feedback was necessary to refine the flow.

Second, Student Heterogeneity posed a difficulty. Students entered the course with varying levels of prior cultural knowledge, English proficiency, and personal interest in ideological discourse. Designing tasks that were sufficiently challenging for advanced students yet accessible and meaningful for others required careful differentiation, which was time-consuming.

Finally, Resource and Support Limitations were evident. The instructor spent considerable time curating or creating Chinese-side theoretical materials and case studies, as readily available textbooks remain Western-centric. This points to a systemic gap identified by scholars like Zhang (2020), highlighting the need for more teaching resources that support this integrative model.

## **Discussion**

This study’s findings demonstrate that the proposed “Value-Knowledge-Competency” framework provides a viable and effective structure for achieving the organic integration of ideological education and intercultural competency development. The success of this integration, however, is contingent upon navigating several critical issues illuminated by the practice.

### **Achieving Organic Fusion: From “Mechanical Addition” to “Pedagogical Ecology”**

In our view, the primary significance of this teaching practice is its successful move beyond the “mechanical addition” of ideological content—a frequent critique of earlier efforts where ideological content was superficially appended (Zhang, 2020). The framework facilitated what can be termed a “pedagogical ecology”, where value cultivation, knowledge construction, and skill application became interdependent and mutually reinforcing. For instance, the “Cultural Narrative Project” was not a task plus a value lesson; the act of competently analyzing and presenting a Chinese cultural perspective was the process of value internalization. This illustrates how the task itself can become a vehicle for value shaping. The instructor’s evolved role from transmitter to facilitator of dialogue was crucial in sustaining this ecology, a shift also identified as key in interactive models like the flipped classroom (Ma & Wu, 2023).

### **Broader Implications: A Transferable Model for Holistic Reform**

This case offers a transferable model for the holistic reform of foreign language courses under the New Liberal Arts. It responds directly to the call for balancing global perspectives with Chinese cultural subjectivity (Wen, 2022). By structurally requiring Sino-Western theoretical dialogue (e.g., Hofstede vs. “民胞物与”), the

model institutionalizes a balanced knowledge base. Furthermore, it aligns with the competency-oriented turn in education by making complex, value-laden tasks the core of assessment, moving towards the comprehensive evaluation envisioned by scholars (Yang, 2022; Chen, 2021). The framework thus provides a concrete “how-to” pathway for instructors seeking to implement the high-level mandates of national policies and educational initiatives.

### **Pedagogical Implications and Practical Recommendations**

Beyond its theoretical and model-level contributions, this case study yields concrete implications for classroom practice. To translate the integrative framework into sustainable pedagogy, three actionable recommendations are proposed.

First, to facilitate seamless integration, instructors can adopt a modular, theme-based course design. By organizing the syllabus around core intercultural themes (e.g., “identity”, “communication styles”, and “conflict resolution”), educators can pre-design at least one “fusion task” per module that intrinsically weaves together a target competency (e.g., critical analysis) with a core value (e.g., cultural confidence) through carefully selected knowledge content. This proactive planning helps avoid the artificial “tacking on” of ideological elements during instruction.

Second, to address student heterogeneity, differentiated scaffolding is essential. This can be implemented by providing tiered learning resources (e.g., foundational vs. advanced readings on Chinese philosophical concepts) and designing flexible task options within a single assignment. Establishing peer learning groups composed of students with complementary strengths can further foster collaborative understanding and reduce the instructional burden of catering to diverse needs simultaneously.

Finally, to alleviate the resource constraint, we emphasize the urgent need for collaborative resource development. Building a shared digital repository—hosting teaching cases, comparative theoretical notes, sample student work, and aligned assessment rubrics—within departmental, institutional, or even national teaching communities would dramatically reduce the individual preparation load. Such a living resource, open to contributions and adaptations, is key to scaling the integrative approach beyond isolated motivated practitioners.

These steps, though requiring initial effort and institutional support, are critical for embedding the “Value-Knowledge-Competency” framework into the everyday fabric of foreign language education.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The study’s limitations must be acknowledged. First, its case-specific nature means findings are contextual. The positive outcomes were observed within a specific course at one university with a motivated instructor. Generalizability requires testing the framework across diverse institutional and disciplinary contexts. Second, the evaluation primarily captured short-term effects within one semester. While students reported perspective shifts and demonstrated competency in projects, the long-term durability of these values and their translation into real-world intercultural behaviors remain unknown. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track long-term impact. Third, the challenge of resource development points to a systemic need. The instructor’s extensive effort in curating materials underscores the urgent demand for supporting resources, such as textbooks and case libraries that natively embody the integrative framework, to lower the implementation barrier for educators.

## Conclusion

This exploratory study set out to investigate how ideological education and intercultural competency cultivation can be organically integrated within an Intercultural Communication course. The proposed and implemented “Value-Knowledge-Competency” three-dimensional framework proved to be an effective pedagogical architecture for this purpose. It successfully guided the reconstruction of course content towards balanced Sino-Western dialogue, the design of complex tasks that inherently fostered cultural confidence, and the development of assessments that evaluated integrated learning outcomes. Feedback from both instructor and students indicated that this approach facilitated meaningful perspective shifts, enhanced identity, and developed practical skills, moving the course beyond its traditional confines.

The practice confirms that the dual objectives of the New Liberal Arts and curriculum ideology are not only compatible but can be synergistically achieved through deliberate pedagogical design. However, the challenges of seamless execution, student heterogeneity, and resource constraints highlight that such integration is a sophisticated endeavor requiring sustained institutional support and teacher development.

As a next step, our research team plans to expand the scope by applying and adapting this framework across different institutional contexts and student cohorts. Furthermore, actively exploring technological empowerment—through virtual exchange platforms or AI (artificial intelligence)-assisted scenario simulations—could provide innovative solutions to create immersive, value-laden intercultural experiences. Ultimately, conducting long-term “追踪研究” (“zhui zong yan jiu”, tracking studies) is essential to evaluate the enduring impact of such integrated education on graduates’ professional conduct and civic-minded global engagement, ensuring that the reforms truly cultivate the talents needed for China’s role in a complex world.

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