

# Cultivation of the intercultural communication ability of English learners in the epidemic era from the perspective of the metaverse—taking China as an example

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**Abstract.** Due to the influence of large class teaching and exam-oriented education, Chinese students' English learning, often intercultural communication ability, is weak; however, with the advancement of globalization, China, which is increasingly involved in international affairs, plays an increasingly important role in the world. [1] For applied Chinese and Western countries in the values, social system and cultural differences, there are often cultural conflicts in the actual communication and communication barriers. Therefore, it is crucial for Chinese students to enhance their awareness of intercultural communication, enhance their sensitivity to cultural differences, and strengthen their ability to process and screen information in intercultural communication. In the epidemic era, English teaching has to face more restrictions, such as social distance, the cultivation of intercultural communication ability is more restricted, and the transformation and upgrading of education is imminent. Based on the met-verse perspective, this paper discusses the competence of intercultural English learners in the epidemic era and aims to provide a direction for the cultivation of English learners' intercultural communication awareness in future higher education.

## 1 Introduction

The globalization process of economy, politics, science and technology and culture makes people in different countries and regions communicate more frequently. As the universal language of the world, English plays an important role in connecting and linking. In the information age, globalization and cultural diversity coexist, and English education should be adjusted again. China has the largest number of English learners in the world and is facing great challenges and opportunities. Today, the international conflicts caused by COVID-19 have further demonstrated the importance of intercultural communication, and English education should do something about it. Cultural differences exist objectively, but cultural differences do not necessarily lead to cultural estrangement. Intercultural communication is a concept put forward to avoid cultural estrangement caused by cultural differences. [2] Although there is a growing demand for the cultivation of intercultural communication competence in China, students' intercultural communication awareness is still quite shallow. Based on the perspective of the Metaverse, this paper combines the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence in English education with the modern educational technology and explores the educational boundaries and development possibilities with a view to providing effective ways to cultivate intercultural communicative competence so that

students can truly take me as the main role in English learning and use it for themselves.

## 2 English learning and intercultural communication

While learning English, we are not only imperceptibly learning its pronunciation, glyph, morphology and grammar, but is also influenced by its cultural background. According to Kramsch (1988), the relation of language and culture in applied linguistics is inseparable from the issues surrounding the use of language technologies. [3]

Language is the epitome of social reality and a special cultural phenomenon. Its formation and development is influenced by the national political economy, historical tradition, population composition and natural environment. When we are learning the language, the communication and interaction between the domestic culture and the destination language culture takes place in every moment, running through the learning, which can encourage the students to understand and understand the language phenomenon and wider the students' range of knowledge. Therefore, the core of language learning is the cultivation of intercultural communication ability. It is impossible for us to treat culture from language separately, and it is also impossible to avoid the learning of English culture in English teaching.

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Great differences exist in the cultural environment between the East and the West. The current social institution and ideology and value system in China are completely different from those in the west. This is a considerable project for Chinese students because learning English means receiving and digesting much information from Western culture. When 'outsiders' stay in contact with another culture, according to Taylor (1994: 389-392), they are gradually forced to experience transformation, which means that learners must view their world from a totally different perspective, a perspective that might be in conflict with their earlier values and beliefs. Taylor emphasizes that conscious perspective transformation is required during the improvement of intercultural competence. This gives meaning to our own experiences but at the same time limits our perception of reality. [4]

As an international common language, English has a considerable influence in the world. According to a study by Cambridge University Press (2018), 350 million people in China have some knowledge of English, while 100 million have some knowledge in India. There are probably more English speakers in China than in the United States (one in five Americans does not speak English at home). China is the world's most English learners, and the influence of English culture is undoubtedly profound, but in learning utilitarianism and exam-oriented education popular today, China's intercultural communication education is often superficial; therefore, not every student has enough consciousness and ability to analyze and screen information. In the process of communication, the two cultures will inevitably produce conflict. At this time, students lacking intercultural communication ability will have difficulty grasping their own cultural orientation, and when dealing with the relationship between foreign culture and domestic culture, they easily take two extremes. First, it shows the narrow great nationalism, pursues the absolute purity and orthodoxy of the domestic culture, and completely negates and solemnly rejects all foreign cultures and foreign things. Second, blindly worship foreign culture, lose cultural confidence, and then be assimilated and swallowed up by foreign culture. For similar or similar cultures, the absence of intercultural communication ability easily leads to their own vague cultural positioning and frequent cultural disputes.

English education in the development of the needs of The Times and the process of globalization aims at cultivating under the multicultural background of English talent and can strengthen the input and output of culture, effective communication in social reality, avoid invalid cultural differences and even negative communication processes. At the same time, in the exchange and collision with different cultures and ideas, we should enhance pride in our national culture and the inclusiveness of other cultures and promote the prosperity of the world culture.

### **3 The Metaverse and its educational properties**

The concept of "Metaverse" first appeared in the science fiction novel *Snow Crash* in 1992. In 2021, with the launch of Roblox. The Metaverse is the post realistic universe, a perpetual and persistent multi-user environment merging physical reality with digital virtuality. [5] Metaverse integrating big data, artificial intelligence, blockchain and other digital technologies can provide individuals with an open and inclusive learning space and teaching space, triggering new education and teaching reform. [6] Metaverse can supplement the teaching design that is difficult to achieve in reality to transcend the limitations of real-world teaching in a specific dimension and play a convenient and effective role in the special field of educational Metaverse. [7] It can break the limitation of space physics in traditional classrooms, broaden the boundary of education, create digital identities for teachers and students, administrators and other related persons, and establish online virtual courses to provide teachers and students with multisensory interaction forms anytime and anywhere, which provides us with a high sense of immersion, and can carry out personalized teaching activities. Currently, when online teaching must be carried out frequently due to the epidemic, the application and development of Metaverse technology are of great significance to the reform in the field of English education and can support the development of communicative teaching. The landing and sustainable development of metaverse technology both show us the possibility and inevitability of the integration of education and Metaverse.

### **4 The dilemma of intercultural communication English**

In recent years, although many scholars have made great progress in the field of English teaching and intercultural communication, in fact, the implementation of Chinese daily English teaching and learning activities still shows certain narrowness, such as lack of language environment, oral teaching methods, lack of cultural awareness, mechanical learning, etc.. Teachers for intercultural communication in knowledge, and students in a passive state cannot reflect the main position of the students. This drawback has become increasingly apparent since the epidemic has deprived the physical environment of English teaching.

#### **4.1 Social distancing and limitations**

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has spread to the whole world, affecting almost all countries and regions. The epidemic was first found in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It may enter the host through respiratory tract or mucous membrane surface (such as conjunctiva). At present, there is no standard treatment for this disease,

and supportive treatment is the only strategy. According to the report of the World Health Organization (WHO as of December 7 2022), more than 641 million confirmed cases and 6.6 million deaths have been reported worldwide.[8]

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in human history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries in 2020. According to S Pokhrel, closures of schools, institutions and other learning spaces have impacted more than 94% of the world's student population. [9] Social distancing and restrictive movement policies have significantly disturbed traditional educational practices.

Social distancing expects people to keep a distance of 1.5 meters when communicating, which is one of the most effective way to the spread of the virus, so as to control the rate of case increase (M Qian and J Jiang 2022).[10] Epidemic control measures that reduce the population mix may delay the peak and reduce the final scale of the epidemic. This was clearly reflected during the continuous outbreak of the epidemic in Wuhan, China. Keeping physical distance and travel restrictions will help reduce the spread of COVID-19(Prem K, Liu Y, Russell TW et al 2020).[11]

Professors and learners have had to use online education platforms for teaching, e-learning tools have played a crucial role in the pandemic, and online learning platforms have become an alternative to traditional teaching.

Due to the reversal of COVID-19, the Chinese government has adopted relatively conservative policies to safeguard the health of the people. In special periods, people have to maintain a certain social distance to maintain social order and national security, which has greatly affected the education system of schools, especially in college teaching. Colleges and universities adopt a blockade policy to ensure the safety of students' lives. The whole process of English teaching, including intercultural communication teaching, must be limited to the online process. The COVID-19 epidemic has hindered the global flow of teachers and prevented foreign English teachers from returning to classes. Some international schools with the advantages and characteristics of English teaching have been affected. Many students have to turn to online platforms to continue their studies. Society has shown a huge teaching demand for online educational resources, but the current development of online education in China is still not enough to fully meet this demand, and there are considerable limitations. Removing some difficult-to-load online learning education costs families cannot provide students with good online education experience accidents. The communication and interaction between teachers and students, students and students has become a major problem. In the absence of face-to-face teaching, students' learning status and learning effect is difficult to guarantee, and education quality is not stable, which makes intercultural communication activities not as expected. Students cannot learn together, and the current home learning is difficult to provide them with the same learning atmosphere as at school. At school, students are

encouraged to participate in a variety of cross-cultural communication activities, such as face-to-face exchanges with foreign teachers, activities related to western culture, etc., so that they can have a more intuitive understanding of English culture. However, during the COVID-19 epidemic, the opportunities for these activities were greatly reduced or deprived. As a result, they are more likely to show academic burnout in the course of learning.

During the period of COVID-19, not only students but also teachers were placed in a passive position. They need to make more efforts to adapt to the change of teaching methods, meet the needs of students for professional knowledge, and coordinate their needs for social emotions.[12] Make up for the learning loss and prepare for the unpredictable combination of the coming distance learning, mixed learning and classroom learning. According to the study of Tim Pressley, during the COVID-19 epidemic, teachers face new requirements for teaching, job expectations and classroom environment, and are more likely to show job burnout. [13]

#### **4.2 Ideological risk and cultural aphasia phenomenon**

With the continuous development of globalization, intercultural communication has become increasingly frequent, and the requirements have become higher. However, at the same time, due to the impact of the epidemic, intercultural communication has been blocked, and the development of the world has also shown the extreme shortcomings of anti-globalization.[14]

The epidemic has not only affected intercultural communication activities in English teaching but also stimulated hatred and hostility among the people of all countries. Outbreaks create fear, and fear is a key ingredient for racism and xenophobia to thrive.[15] Following the spread of COVID-19 from Wuhan, China, [16] discrimination against Chinese people has increased. In addition, linked to politics, a new wave of racism rises, discrimination discourse becomes a secondary disaster, Chinese media cannot grasp the voice of international networks, and the task of understanding and communication among cultures is more difficult. For some Chinese people, especially those directly in the overseas public opinion field, this will also lead to the weakening of their national identity and have a great impact on the learning of English learners. Although people have gained much information in intercultural communication, the world they see is still one-sided and oriented due to political and other factors. In intercultural communication, a culture with weak international communication consciousness is easily reduced to a relatively weak culture and then is suppressed, invaded, and misinterpreted by the relatively strong culture, and the phenomenon of cultural aphasia occurs, which violates the original intention of intercultural communication. How to correctly identify cultural prejudice, stereotypes and ethnic centrism and

establish the consciousness of cultural equality has become an important task.

#### **4.3 Economic recession and employment situation of college students**

The outbreak of the COVID-19 has caused the recession of China and the global economy, which can be reflected in education. Because the employment situation is not good, and the supply and demand side of employment for college graduates is unbalanced, the number of students taking postgraduate entrance exams and preparing to study abroad has soared to avoid employment competition. According to the statistics provided by the China Minister of Education (MoE). In 2017, the number of postgraduate candidates broke the 2 million mark for the first time, reaching 2.01 million. In 2022, the number of postgraduate candidates will reach 4.57 million, 800000 more than 3.77 million in 2021, an increase of about 17.5%. [17] Therefore, the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence in English teaching is more necessary and practical for students. Students' demand for and cultivation of intercultural communicative competence is growing. However, due to the impact of the epidemic on the teaching arrangements, many gathering activities have been cancelled, which makes the originally narrow intercultural communication channels more narrow, and it is difficult for schools to provide them with intercultural communication teaching that matches their needs.

### **5 The Application Value of Metaverse Technology in English Teaching**

As Michael BYRAM, Bella GRIBKOVA and Hugh STARKEY wrote in the book, social identities are related to cultures. Someone who is 'Chinese' will have acquired that identity through being brought up surrounded by other Chinese, unconsciously learning their beliefs, values and behaviors. Similarly, someone whose social identities include being 'a teacher' will have acquired the knowledge, values and behaviors they share with other teachers through a process of socialization .....to see only one identity in a person is a simplification. An intercultural speaker is aware of this simplification and knows something about the beliefs, values and behaviors that are 'Chinese' but is also aware that there are other identities hidden in the person with whom they are interacting, even if they do not know what the associated beliefs, values and behaviors are. Therefore, an intercultural speaker needs some knowledge about what it means to be Chinese or a teacher or indeed a Chinese teacher, in other words, the 'best' teacher is neither the native nor the nonnative speaker, but the person who can help learners see relationships between their own and other cultures can help them acquire interest in and curiosity about 'otherness', and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people's perspectives.[18] Therefore, when we use Metacognition technology to create a communication platform for native English

speakers and nonnative English speakers, we need to clarify the main body position of our native culture in cultural communication, clarify the content and purpose of intercultural communication, and prevent improper and abuse of communication.

#### **5.1 Meet the needs of English communication of special groups**

Chinese teaching advocates the all-round development consisted of morality, intelligence, physique, beauty and labor, which needs to mobilize multiple senses to feel and apply the knowledge learned. However, special students often have difficulty fully enjoying classroom interaction due to the limitations of various obstacles, they lack classroom experience, and have fewer choices of cultivating communicative ability and communicative consciousness than ordinary students. What's worse, however, education policies are prone to a lack of disability due to the relatively small population, especially in the epidemic era, where these students are vulnerable to neglect by mainstream schools.

After the outbreak of COVID-19, on 12 February 2020, the China Minister of Education (MoE) issued the first document, Notice on the work arrangement of "Stopping Schooling Without Stopping Learning" during the closures of primary and secondary schools (MoE 2020), to guide primary and secondary schools to take effective measures to provide online lessons for students. For students with disabilities, these regulations do not mention them. According to the arrangement of MoE's notice, on 17 February, the National Network Cloud Platform was built to provide online lessons and learning materials for secondary school students. At the same time, China Education Television Channel 4 is used to provide online lessons for primary school students. These two platforms acted as main online resource centers during the COVID-19 period. However, these two platforms' designs are not based on the barrier-free environment principle, which means that some students with disabilities cannot use these two platforms.[19]

In Chinese English teaching, the cultivation of intercultural communication ability is restricted by many factors. Although many schools have begun to focus on cultivating students' intercultural communication ability, they are rarely reflected in English teaching in actual teaching, and there are serious exam-taking problems. According to Hu Wenzhong and Hong, cultural teaching may contain five aspects: language communication (including vocabulary, idioms, grammar, rhetoric), nonverbal communication (expression, eyes, gestures, posture, distance, etc. ), communication customs and etiquette (greeting, praise, appellation, friends, gifts, etc. ), social structure and interpersonal relationships (family relationships, relatives, friends and colleagues, community relations, etc. ), values (individual and collective, people and the outside world, way of thinking, knowledge and value, etc.).[20] For these special students, the development of these communication activities is greatly limited, and the

cultivation of intercultural communication ability is even more difficult.

Considering these special circumstances, it is necessary for us to actively explore effective English teaching methods and teaching ideas. The application of metaverse technology in English teaching presents a diversified pattern and flexible mode. Compared with the traditional teaching environment, it is more friendly and inclusive to disabled students and can make up for students' physiological shortcomings through the integration of virtual reality technology for visual impairment, hearing impairment or other physiological defects of special students to provide personalized, digital teaching and service, provide students with sound embodiment and ideal body, minimize the physiological conditions, and solve the problem of insufficient disabled teachers in real life. Immersive virtualization interactions should be implemented to promote the healthy development of language. Students can devote themselves to virtual teaching to meet their practical needs to the greatest extent and greatly improve their ability to perceive, transform and participate in the world. The openness and social characteristics of the metaverse can help disabled students find spiritual and like-minded friends, form a strong interactive learning community, and create a good interactive atmosphere; give students the space to bet on emotions, independently build a personalized learning environment, and bring positive feelings and positive experiences back to the real world, which is conducive to the real world for good change.

Social space in the Metaverse is able to break through traditional instructional boundaries, incorporate social virtual reality that simulates face-to-face interactions to facilitate these benefits, and allow people to interact freely without the barriers present in the physical world. The Metaverse gives us freedom and creativity in how users want to be seen and eliminates the awkward situations that disabled students may face when personally interacting with others, improving the scope and quality of the educational access available to disabled users.

## **5.2 Create a situation to increase effective communication methods**

Invalid communication is not only conducive to the cultivation of intercultural communication ability; it cannot provide emotional value and satisfaction for learners and may even have a negative effect, making students' understanding of English culture deviation, deepening their national centrism and placing them into a fixed mindset. In current Chinese English education, the cultivation of intercultural communication ability is often superficial and written. Teachers' teaching methods, classroom behavior, and teaching style are restricted by physical conditions and cultural background. At the same time, the phenomenon of teachers' "hall" is widespread. Due to the existence of a Chinese exam-oriented education system, especially in primary and secondary schools, teachers in class

discourse are much higher than students. Moreover, they are often limited to the use of specific expressions and vocabularies to interpret intercultural communicative competence, but this is far from enough to cover the cultivation requirements of intercultural communicative competence.

Different from Western countries, due to the large population base and the unbalanced allocation of teaching resources, China generally adopts the large-class education system. This educational teaching system is conducive to large-scale teaching to all students, expands the teaching energy of a teacher, and ensures that learning activities are carried out steadily and orderly. However, in such a process, students are often not the active builders of knowledge but the passive objects of indoctrination. They cannot teach every student well in accordance with their aptitude and ignore the development of students' emotions and personality. This is not uncommon, and many students passively experience this wholesale and ineffective social interaction, and the long-term performance of this teaching task is still unsatisfactory. There is a strong relationship between language and cultural input and students' cultural learning effect. At present, English teaching in most schools is implemented in the construction of the environment, which lacks the natural environment of cultural communication.

The application of metaverse technology provides direction for intercultural communication teaching in future English teaching. It has the characteristics of immersion, personalization and diversity and can be anytime and anywhere for English learners to architecture a good and effective virtual learning environment. For learners to build foreign language exchange learning clubs, they can ignore the time difference, regional restrictions, and dialog with intelligent robots or native speakers, make students master certain controls, and change the current situation of students passively accepting information in English learning. Parents and teachers can also accompany the study and access the platform with students to pay attention to the students' dialog in real time.

Metaverse virtual space also supports us in using body language to interact, express ourselves, and exchange information. In cultural communication, body language is often very different. Each nationality has its own language of posture and gesture. We can fully mobilize our facial expressions, gestures, body posture and other functions to assist in information transmission and communication.

## **5.3 Promotion of the cultural awareness of native English speakers**

Intercultural communication is a bilateral process that is not only conducive to the development of the intercultural communication ability of English nonnative speakers (i.e., the target learners) but also conducive to native English speakers intuitively contacting and feeling other cultures. It can enable us to express more expectations for English learners but also does not ignore

the development of the intercultural communication ability of native speakers.

As the universal language of the world, English occupies an important position in the world. Lennox Morison claimed in the BBC capital report that Native English speakers are the world's worst communicators. Many native English speakers are happy that English is the common language, so they do not have to spend time learning another language. However, most people in the world are not native English speakers, so English speakers should be born with learning to adapt." Native speakers are at a disadvantage when you are in a lingua franca situation," where English is being used as a common denominator, says Jennifer Jenkins, professor of global Englishes at the UK's University of Southampton. Dale Coulter, head of English at language course provider TLC International House in Baden, Switzerland, agrees: "English speakers with no other language often have a lack of awareness of how to speak English internationally." [21]

This can also be seen in The Daily Mirror. Attitudes are generally positive toward learning MFLs in this newspaper, with Britons described as "lazy" for often not being bilingual. However, this positive attitude only encompasses European languages. This is reflective of the multilingual elitism discussed by Jaworska and Themistocleous (2018), where certain languages are presented as superior to others. In this case, European languages are categorized at the top of a language hierarchy. The characterization of Mandarin as the "most useful non-European language" to learn also highlights this multilingual elitism, as Mandarin is described as less useful in relation to European languages, suggesting a general view of European languages as the most useful. However, even the mention of Mandarin suggests some awareness of the advantage of speaking non-European languages, suggesting that the Daily Mirror is attempting to become less Eurocentric. Daily Mail: Britain is far behind Europe in learning foreign languages, with fewer than one in three under 30 s able to read and write in anything other than English learning-foreign-languages. It further contributes to this attitude of Eurocentrism surrounding second language learning by featuring an article expressing concern for Britain being perceived as inferior to other European nations due to a lack of bilingualism. An article described second language learning as being in "free fall", and this being a "problem", suggesting that fear of inferiority in Europe is an insecurity for this newspaper, reflecting a national concern.

When we are engaged in intercultural communication, any attitude too aggressive or too conservative is not desirable. Only by truly participating in the process of communication, adopting multiple ways of expressing the same point of view, confirming to the audience, consulting some reactions or behaviors, and understanding the different personalities of different cultures can we truly promote our understanding of the destination language culture. By combining Metaverse technology, we can break the limitations of time, space, age, physiology, and social distancing, object the native English speakers 'desire for the external world, and make

use of English learners' needs for oral and cultural exchange objects to building a universal exchange system. English learners and English learners are not bathed in avoiding fetishes and superstitions of foreign culture worship and narrow great nationalism, and they treat their native culture, purpose and culture fairly and objectively. In addition, the move may help ease students' anxiety and loneliness during the outbreak and improve their mental health.

#### 5.4 Incubate more related positions

Due to the epidemic, the number of inbound foreign teachers has decreased significantly. More Chinese learners have learned English online, and more foreigners have applied to become online foreign teachers. It helps incubate more jobs and ease the pressure on the talent market. The application of this technology in English teaching enables a considerable part of the learning content to be transplanted to the cloud, creating new social and professional relationships, which can provide more positions for English teachers and facilitate students' distance consultation.

At the same time, due to the serious imbalance of educational resources in China, especially the tendency of English educational resources in coastal areas and eastern areas, there are differences even in the province, and the quality of education in developed areas and less developed areas is obviously different. Students in developed regions also have more opportunities to have access to quality educational resources and gain more opportunities to develop intercultural communication skills than students in other regions.[22] The application of universe technology helps to eliminate inequality, optimize the education industry, and promote fair education, online professional teachers and virtual assistants across those who cannot cross the physical distance, the equilibrium resources in the real world in the way of metaverse, and students in the shared knowledge base through learning to explore the breadth of life and touch the dimension of the world.

## 6 Conclusion

Space technology into English teaching has become possible; it will combine reality, present the colorful world to students, the multiple dimensions of the real world, play to the function of the English kaleidoscope, and fully mobilize and cultivate students' intercultural communication ability.[23] It will bring great changes for modern education, prompting English learners intercultural communication ability from quantitative to qualitative change, especially in the epidemic era, which will play a huge role.

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