International Education Forum, 2026, Volume 4, Issue 10
https://bbwpublisher.com/journal/IEF
Online ISSN: 2981-8605
Print ISSN: 3083-4902

AI-Empowered Strategies for Cultivating Intercultural Communicative Competence in High School English Teaching

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Abstract: High school English cross-cultural teaching has long faced real challenges like teachers only understanding things superficially, students lacking initiative, and a gap between learning and practical use, while the widespread use of AI has brought new possibilities to tackle these issues. This article focuses on high school English teachers and, using a mix of literature review, surveys, interviews, and case studies, identifies factors limiting the effectiveness of cross-cultural teaching across three dimensions: teachers, resources, and assessment. It also builds a strategy system around textbook use, activity design, resource integration, AI-assisted teaching, and student assessment, which is finally tested with the "Festivals and Celebrations" unit from all three volumes of the PEP textbook series by People's Education Press.

Keywords: AI; High school English; Intercultural communicative competence; Cultivation strategies

Online publication: November 11, 2026

1. Introduction

The "General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, 2025 Revision)" clearly positions cultural awareness as an important dimension of core English literacy and points out that students need to gradually develop cross-cultural cognition, attitudes, and behavioral orientations during language learning. This requirement shows that cultivating cross-cultural communication skills should not be limited to transmitting cultural knowledge but should also encourage students to understand, compare, and express culture. Looking at current cross-cultural teaching practices, there are noticeable shortcomings: some teachers still focus on shallow cultural information like festivals and customs, classroom activities tend to be closed, and assessment mechanisms focus too much on memorizing language knowledge, without fully valuing process assessments of cross-cultural attitudes, communication strategies, and critical reflection.

From existing research, there are mainly three gaps: first, most studies only discuss the significance of

intercultural teaching from a theoretical perspective, rarely analyzing systematically how teachers should design effective teaching activities; second, research mostly focuses on the university level, with fewer studies targeting high school; third, research on how AI tools can assist high school English intercultural teaching is also quite limited. Generative AI brings multiple affordances for language teaching, yet educators must stay alert to practical risks such as unreliable output and overreliance by learners [1].

Against this backdrop, this study chose high school English teachers as the research subjects, focusing on how to cultivate intercultural communication skills in the age of artificial intelligence. The research uses a combination of literature review, questionnaires, interviews, and case studies, first sorting out the limiting factors from the perspectives of teachers, resources, and evaluation, and then constructing a strategy system from textbook development, activity design, resource integration, AI-assisted teaching, and student assessment, and conducting practical verification using the "Festivals and Celebrations" units. Built upon naturallanguage interaction technology for AIsupported foreign language teaching practice [2].

In theory, this study adds new theoretical resources for the deep integration of AI technology and foreign language teaching; in practice, it provides frontline teachers with actionable strategies, helping boost their cross-cultural teaching skills and AI literacy, while also promoting students' cultural awareness.

2. Current status and constraining factors of high school English intercultural teaching

2.1. Current status and main problems

With AI technology developing so fast and the new curriculum focusing on cultural awareness, high school English intercultural communication teaching has made progress but still faces many challenges.

First, teachers' understanding of intercultural teaching is still quite shallow. Teaching mostly just introduces superficial cultural information like festivals and customs, without exploring the values and ways of thinking behind cultural phenomena, so students' understanding of cultural differences remains surface-level, and it is hard for them to truly develop cultural awareness. Second, students' initiative is not reflected. Teachers pre-set too much content and often replace students' intercultural experiences with their own interpretations; activity designs are also quite closed off, like simple cultural knowledge quizzes, which limits students' chances to compare and reflect on cultures in real or simulated situations. As a result, teaching activities become fragmented and are not coherently designed around the core goal of developing intercultural communication skills, making it hard to guide students from cultural perception to cultural understanding and expression.

This kind of divide further causes a gap between learning and application. Post-reading or listening activities are often quite mechanical, lacking theme transfer activities that connect to real life and contemporary contexts, so students cannot effectively turn intercultural knowledge into practical communication skills. Behind these issues are shortcomings in teaching resources and assessment. The development of teaching resources is quite limited, especially the use of AI tools to create and integrate multimodal cultural materials; meanwhile, the assessment system overemphasizes the memorization of language knowledge, neglecting process-based evaluation of intercultural attitudes, communication strategies, and critical reflection.

2.2. Analysis of constraining factors

The issues above are caused by a combination of factors, not just one single reason. In teaching, it is necessary to come up with targeted strategies, and the first step is to clearly understand the factors that limit cross-cultural teaching.

In the frontline practice of cross-cultural teaching, teachers play a crucial role, and the success of the courses often rests on them. A teacher's own cross-cultural competence and level of AI usage directly affect the quality of teaching outcomes, which is specifically reflected in three aspects: their understanding of cross-cultural theory, their grasp of Chinese and foreign cultural knowledge, and their abilities in course design and classroom management.

Although many teachers value cross-cultural teaching, they find it hard to really put these ideas into practice in the classroom due to a lack of systematic theory and practical guidance. This partly explains why understanding often stays superficial and why activity design can be quite closed off—not because teachers do not want to teach this way, but because they lack support to turn ideas into practice. Insufficient teachers' technical awareness constitutes a prominent obstacle hindering the realworld implementation of AIdriven EFL teaching in secondary contexts [3]. At the same time, teachers' familiarity with AI varies, making it difficult to effectively integrate AI tools. This further adds to the challenges of developing teaching resources, passing the limitations at the teacher level onto the resources themselves.

The shortage of resources makes the difficulties teachers already face even worse. In high schools at different stages of development, teaching resources directly affect how intercultural teaching is carried out. As for existing textbooks, most of their cultural content is just factual information with little interaction, making it hard to support more in-depth activities like cultural comparisons or role-playing. In this situation, teachers have to develop resources themselves, and the lack of training, time, and energy greatly increases their workload. Clearly, the shortage of resources is not just about quantity; it is closely linked to teachers' abilities: the more limited a teacher's professional development, the greater the resource gap; the bigger the gap, the heavier the teaching load, and issues like fragmented teaching and a disconnect between learning and application become almost inevitable.

If the teacher and resource dimensions explain why teaching struggles to go deeper, then the evaluation dimension answers why teaching has not received the attention it deserves over the long term. The current evaluation system clearly guides teaching practices. At present, whether it is the university entrance exam or regular school tests, the focus is mostly on students' knowledge, with relatively little attention to cross-cultural skills, which means both teachers and students generally lack emphasis on cross-cultural teaching. This situation not only dampens teachers' enthusiasm but also makes it hard for resource investment to get institutional support. At the same time, how much attention schools pay also affects teachers' willingness to participate. Also, under the existing evaluation framework, the effectiveness of using AI tools is hard to demonstrate, which suppresses teachers' motivation to improve their own AI skills.

Overall, the constraints of teachers, resources, and assessment are not isolated from each other but are interconnected and reinforce one another, together forming a loop that hinders the progress of intercultural teaching. To break through this dilemma, a systematic strategy covering teaching implementation, resource integration, and assessment reform is needed—this is exactly the core content discussed in the third part of this study.

3. Construction of strategies for AI-empowered cultivation of intercultural communicative competence in high school English

3.1. Textbook content exploitation strategy

High school English teaching largely relies on textbooks, which have become the main medium for cross-cultural teaching. Teachers should dig deeper into the potential value of the textbooks, focus on cultural angles based on unit themes, and summarize the values, etiquette, and customs of both Chinese and Western cultures. This helps guide students to compare and analyze cultural differences, gradually develop an awareness of cultural comparison, and understand the deeper meaning behind different cultures. During this process, AI tools can be used to look up relevant information to broaden students' horizons and enrich their knowledge.

3.2. Classroom activity design strategy

Educators should use layered activities to promote the development of intercultural competence in three stages.

At the beginner level, students get to grasp basic cultural knowledge through cultural lectures and cross-cultural exchange competitions; at the intermediate level, activities like case studies, group discussions, and cultural comparisons help boost their cultural sensitivity; at the advanced level, they practice through role-playing and scenario simulation, with AI tools playing roles to assist in training cross-cultural communication skills and adaptability.

3.3. Teaching resource integration strategy

Promoting cross-cultural teaching relies on integrating diverse resources, and teaching materials, online learning resources, and other types of resources should all be used reasonably. In this process, teachers can use AI tools to quickly gather and organize cultural materials, for example, by asking AI tools to quickly get relevant materials or using AI tools to translate English cultural materials into Chinese. However, teachers need to independently judge the accuracy of AI-generated content and should not rely entirely on AI, instead treating it as a supplementary tool.

3.4. AI-assisted teaching strategy

At the practical implementation level, educators can focus on several approaches. Using AI to generate cross-cultural dialogue materials, teachers can create model dialogues around specific scenarios for classroom demonstrations or student imitation. Students can also interact directly with AI, for example, by introducing Chinese traditional festivals like the Spring Festival or the Mid-Autumn Festival in English, gradually improving their communication skills in simulated situations. AI can also help students with writing and revising cross-cultural topics. After completing a draft, teachers should guide students to independently improve the text using the information provided by AI rather than copying it directly. By comparing the original draft with the AI-revised version, students can enhance their writing skills. Additionally, AI can boost teachers' lesson preparation efficiency by quickly gathering cultural teaching materials and drafting discussion topics, reducing prep time and allowing more focus on optimizing lesson design and addressing individual student differences. It is important to stress that teachers should still use AI with a critical mindset and apply it rationally.

3.5. Student competence evaluation strategy

Assessment plays an important role in cross-cultural teaching, and a scientific and reasonable evaluation can genuinely support students' growth. Teachers should use a variety of assessment methods, not only focusing on cultural knowledge but also considering students' attitudes and cross-cultural communication skills. This can be done through class observations, homework checks, reflective journals, and presentations. When AI is involved in teaching, it is also important to see if students can use these tools thoughtfully and maintain critical thinking, rather than relying solely on AI and giving up independent thinking. Secondaryschool AI literacy education highlights learners' critical evaluation of AIproduced outputs instead of merely mastering operational skills of digital tools [4].

4. Teaching practice and case analysis

To test the feasibility of the above strategy, this study chose the "Festivals and Celebrations" unit from the third volume of the People's Education Press high school English textbook as the platform for teaching practice. This unit, themed around festivals and celebrations, naturally involves comparisons between Chinese and foreign cultures. Before starting the practice, the researcher noticed that the textbook's presentation of festivals is mostly limited to factual aspects such as time and customs. Using traditional teaching methods, students might struggle to grasp the values and ways of thinking behind the festivals. Consequently, this teaching practice focused on four main points: secondary development of textbook content, differentiated activity design, AI-assisted teaching, and diversified assessment.

During the textbook use stage, the teacher guides students to find descriptions of Chinese and foreign festivals in the unit and use AI tools to look up background information on festivals like the Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Christmas, and Thanksgiving. Students work in groups to compare the AI-found information with the textbook content and organize differences into levels such as "reunion and individuality" and "collective and family." The teacher does not give the conclusion directly but asks students to judge the accuracy of the AI-provided information themselves, promoting a critical awareness of using AI.

The activity design is divided into three stages. In the first stage, students learn basic cultural knowledge through festival lectures and cross-cultural quizzes. The second stage involves case comparisons and group discussions, where students analyze the cultural values behind festival customs and gradually realize that differences in festivals are not just about different ways of celebration, but also about different understandings of family, time, and personal relationships in various cultures. The third stage uses role-playing and scenario simulations. Students introduce the Spring Festival to AI in English and answer follow-up questions from AI about festival customs. In class, some students may temporarily struggle to accurately express concepts like "red envelopes" or "staying up on New Year's Eve," and the teacher then guides them to use AI to find the corresponding expressions and compare the suitability of different translations, allowing students to experience the challenges of cross-cultural communication in real-life situations.

In this practice, the role of AI tools mainly shows up in three ways: helping teachers organize materials and design questions to ease lesson preparation; acting as a conversation partner for students to practice cross-cultural communication outside class; and providing editing suggestions in writing tasks. For writing practice, teachers ask students to first independently write a short essay introducing Chinese traditional festivals, then use AI to get editing advice, and reflect on their own shortcomings in accuracy and completeness of cultural information by comparing the original and revised versions. Teachers repeatedly

emphasize that students should not simply copy AI-generated content but should judge whether it is accurate, appropriate, and truly conveys their own intentions.

The assessment combined classroom observation, analysis of student work, and reflection journals, focusing on student engagement, cultural comparison awareness, critical use of AI, and accuracy in written cultural expression. The results showed that students had a deeper understanding of the differences between Chinese and foreign festivals compared to traditional teaching, and some students also began to realize that AI-generated content might be inaccurate or inappropriate. However, there were some issues too: for students with a weaker language foundation, role-playing was too difficult; classroom time was limited, making it hard to fully explore AI tools; and incorporating diverse assessments into the regular system still needs further exploration.

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on strategies for developing intercultural communication skills in high school English teaching in the age of AI. Generative AI adoption within highschool English classrooms transforms teachers' everyday teaching practices as well as students' learningrelated selfperception [5]. By analyzing the current state of intercultural teaching, it found issues like shallow teacher understanding, lack of student initiative, fragmented activities, and a disconnect between learning and application, as well as constraints in teachers, resources, and assessment. To tackle these problems, a strategy system was built around five areas: textbook use, activity design, resource integration, AI-assisted teaching, and student assessment, and was tested through teaching the "Festivals and Celebrations" unit. The results show that the system helps students gain a deeper understanding of cultural differences and begin to develop a critical awareness of using AI, though challenges like controlling the difficulty of role-playing, classroom time allocation, and assessment integration still need improvement.

The value of this study lies in enriching the theoretical framework combining AI and foreign language teaching, and providing frontline teachers with practical strategies, especially on how to use AI tools specifically in textbook development, activity design, resource integration, and essay correction. However, this study still has some limitations: the practice was only carried out in a limited number of classes at one school, the practice period was short, and the evaluation of AI effectiveness was not systematic. Future research could expand the sample, extend the practice period, and gain a deeper understanding from the students' perspective.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding

2026 Student Research Project of Jilin International Studies University AI-Empowered Strategies for Cultivating Intercultural Communicative Competence in High School English Teaching (JWXSKY2026A016) (phased result)

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