

Artificial Intelligence and Intercultural Competence in English Language Teaching: Perspectives from China

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Abstract

As digital technologies become increasingly integrated into English language education, intercultural competence has gained growing importance in teachers' professional development. Based on Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, this paper discusses how AI-supported teaching tools may assist English teachers in developing intercultural awareness, classroom interaction skills, and professional learning practices. Drawing on previous studies and selected teaching cases, the discussion focuses on cognitive, behavioural, and affective aspects of intercultural competence in AI-assisted language teaching contexts. Existing studies suggest that AI-supported teaching tools may assist teachers in organising intercultural learning materials and creating more interactive learning environments.. The paper highlights the potential role of AI technologies in supporting intercultural teaching practices and teacher development. The practical significance lies in providing actionable tools and strategies for English teachers to cope with the challenges of globalised education and providing a reference for corporate cross-cultural management and education training.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Intercultural Competence, English Teachers, Professional Development

Introduction

In many Chinese universities, English teachers are increasingly expected to integrate intercultural communication into language instruction. However, traditional intercultural teaching models face multiple challenges, such as the complexity of cultural differences, the limitations of teaching resources, and the diversity of student needs (Kramsch, 2014). At the same time, AI-based educational technologies are gradually changing classroom interaction, resource access, and teaching design (Chapelle, 2020). Tools such as intelligent tutoring systems, speech-recognition software, and virtual learning environments are increasingly being used in English language classrooms (Levy & Hubbard, 2005; Zheng & Newgarden, 2012). In this context, exploring how AI empowers English language teachers to enhance their intercultural competence and promote professional development has become an essential topic for urgent research.

The discussion in this paper is mainly informed by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which emphasises interaction and learning within social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, intercultural competence can be regarded as a kind of cultural capital (Zhao Q, 2019), the accumulation and transmission of which depends on the educational environment and social interactions (Bourdieu, 1986). Luckin et al. (2016) pointed out that AI technology can significantly improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning through intelligent pushing and personalised learning paths, especially playing an essential role in developing intercultural communication skills. AI technologies may provide teachers and students with broader access to intercultural learning resources and communication opportunities. From Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, AI tools, like virtual classrooms and role-playing systems, help students practice and improve their ability to communicate across cultures in simulated and real-world settings (Vygotsky, 1978).

Literature Review

Existing research on AI-assisted language learning has mainly focused on personalised learning, automated assessment, and digital classroom interaction (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Previous studies have discussed a range of AI-supported teaching tools, including intelligent tutoring systems, speech-recognition applications, and virtual learning environments (Warschauer, 1996; Levy & Hubbard, 2005). Domestic studies have focused more on the practical application of AI technology in English teaching in primary and secondary schools and colleges (Zhang Jingyang & Liu Bao, 2023; Ke Fan, 2022). However, comparatively less attention has been paid to the role of AI in teachers' intercultural professional development (Holmes et al., 2019).

This paper further discusses intercultural competence from cognitive, behavioural, and affective perspectives in AI-assisted teaching environments (Deardorff, 2009). This discussion may contribute to current research on AI-assisted intercultural teaching in English language education. In addition, this study combines Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory to explore in depth how AI technology can enhance English teachers' intercultural competence by accumulating cultural capital and providing social interaction tools.

Research Methodology

This paper mainly adopts a literature-based discussion approach supported by selected teaching cases related to AI-assisted language learning.

Data Source and Sample Selection

The literature review part is mainly based on relevant studies published in SSCI, CSSCI, and other authoritative journals in the past five years to ensure the academic and current nature of the data. The case study section selects three typical application scenarios at home and abroad: AI-enabled international cooperative classroom, AI-supported cultural simulation system, and cross-cultural corpus construction under AI technology. The criteria for case selection include the technology application's innovativeness, the teaching effect's significance, and the data availability.

Case-based Discussion

This paper adopts a case-based discussion approach to examine how AI technologies may support intercultural teaching and English teachers' professional development in higher education contexts. Rather than relying on statistical measurement, the discussion focuses on representative teaching practices and existing studies related to AI-assisted language learning and intercultural communication.

Several teaching scenarios were reviewed, including AI-supported virtual classrooms, intelligent language learning platforms, and online intercultural interaction activities. These cases were selected because they reflect current applications of AI technologies in English language teaching and provide examples of how digital tools can be integrated into intercultural learning environments. Previous studies have suggested that AI-assisted learning environments may increase students' access to multicultural resources and encourage more interactive classroom participation (Chapelle, 2020; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Particular attention was given to teachers' classroom practices and professional adaptation in technology-supported teaching settings. In some cases, AI tools helped teachers organise intercultural learning materials more efficiently and provided students with opportunities to engage in simulated intercultural communication tasks. Virtual learning platforms and speech-recognition technologies were also found to support classroom interaction and reflective learning activities (Levy & Hubbard, 2005; Zheng & Newgarden, 2012).

The discussion additionally considers the challenges associated with AI integration in intercultural teaching. Although AI technologies may improve access to teaching resources and classroom interaction, teachers may still encounter difficulties related to digital literacy, technology dependence, and the balance between language instruction and intercultural understanding. These issues remain important concerns in English language education, particularly in higher education contexts where teachers are expected to combine technological competence with intercultural teaching practices (Holmes et al., 2019).

Overall, the case-based discussion approach allows the paper to examine the relationship between AI technologies and intercultural competence from a practical and educational perspective. The analysis is mainly informed by socio-cultural views of learning, which emphasise interaction, participation, and communication in knowledge development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Conclusions

This paper discussed the potential role of AI technologies in supporting intercultural teaching and English teachers' professional development in higher education contexts. Drawing on previous studies and representative teaching cases, the discussion suggests that AI-assisted learning environments may help teachers improve classroom interaction, access multicultural teaching resources, and develop more flexible intercultural teaching practices (Chapelle, 2020; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

The findings also indicate that AI technologies can provide new opportunities for intercultural communication in English language education. Tools such as intelligent learning platforms, virtual classrooms, and speech-recognition applications may support students' participation

in intercultural learning activities and encourage more interactive learning experiences (Levy & Hubbard, 2005; Zheng & Newgarden, 2012). From a socio-cultural perspective, these technology-supported environments may create more opportunities for communication, collaboration, and reflective learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

At the same time, several challenges should also be acknowledged. The integration of AI technologies into intercultural teaching may increase teachers' workload in technology adaptation and require higher levels of digital literacy. In some educational settings, teachers may also face difficulties in balancing language instruction, intercultural understanding, and technology use. Ethical concerns related to data privacy and technology dependence remain issues that require further attention in future research (Holmes et al., 2019).

Overall, the discussion highlights the growing relationship between AI technologies and intercultural teaching practices in English language education. Future studies may further examine how AI-supported teaching can be applied in different educational contexts and how teachers can be better supported in developing intercultural competence through technology-assisted learning environments.

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