

# Application of Intercultural Communication in Higher Education: A Comparison of Teaching Methods in Larger and Smaller Class Sizes in China

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the application of intercultural communication in Chinese higher education, focusing on the comparison of teaching methods in different class sizes in enhancing students' intercultural understanding and communication skills. Through a brief literature review and theoretical analysis, the study underscores the importance of intercultural communication in the context of globalization, where cultivating students with intercultural competence has become a crucial educational objective. This paper also delineates the concepts and characteristics of both teaching methods and evaluates their strengths and weaknesses in intercultural education. The findings indicate that larger classes are typically professor-centered and emphasize knowledge transmission, whereas smaller classes foster teacher-student interaction, student autonomy, and active participation, offering more opportunities for intercultural engagement. This study advocates for the widespread adoption of teaching methods in smaller classes in higher education to develop globally competent graduates, offers valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and scholars in optimizing teaching methods and improving educational quality.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Communication; Higher Education; Smaller Class Sizes; Educational Methods

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background and Significance

Higher education, as a crucial pathway for nurturing Chinese national pillars and societal backbones, is undergoing transformations in its teaching activities and educational goals with

the deepening trend of globalization. In this context, intercultural communication becomes particularly important. Globalization involves not only the exchange of economy and technology but also the mutual penetration and understanding of cultures, values, and social behaviors. Therefore, cultivating intercultural communication skills in Chinese higher education has become an essential part of societal needs. Through intercultural communication, students can expand their global perspectives, enhance their intercultural communication skills, and improve their social adaptability and professional competitiveness. This exchange is significant for fostering students' global citizenship awareness and multicultural understanding.

### 1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to explore different teaching models in larger and smaller class sizes in promoting intercultural communication skills and to propose suggestions for optimizing teaching models to better foster intercultural communication skills in Chinese higher education. Based on this objective, this paper primarily explores the following questions: What are the specific manifestations of larger and smaller classes in intercultural communication? What are their respective advantages and disadvantages in practice? How can teaching models be improved to specifically enhance students' intercultural communication skills?

### 1.3 Review of Domestic and International Research Status

Research on intercultural communication and educational models has been extensively discussed. Some researchers focus on the importance and implementation strategies of intercultural communication. For example, Huang Lian and Zhu Lin (2008) pointed out

that the reform of college foreign language teaching should emphasize the transformation of classroom teaching models, including the introduction of more intercultural communication content. And Gao Yuan (2024) studied the intercultural adaptability of Confucius Institute Chinese teacher volunteers, indicating the importance of intercultural communication for teachers' professional development. Jiang Meihong (2022) explored the advantages and challenges of ideological and political education in English major courses, pointing out that small-class teaching can better promote intercultural education. These studies mostly stay at the macro level of policy and strategy discussion, but research on how to optimize teaching models to enhance intercultural communication skills is still relatively lacking and needs further research.

## **2. Intercultural Communication in Higher Education**

### **2.1 Intercultural Communication in the Context of Globalization**

Globalization brings opportunities for economic integration and promotes cultural integration and collision. In this process, intercultural communication becomes an indispensable skill. The number of students choosing to study abroad in order to increase their competitiveness is growing. Many of them will be competing to apply for positions in multinational companies. The increasingly fierce competition places higher demands on students' language, communication skills and cultural understanding. Higher education, as a social service, bears the responsibility of cultivating and delivering qualified talents for society and must respond to this urgent demand of skills. Intercultural communication skills are not only reflected in students' language abilities but also include cultural understanding, intercultural communication skills, and adaptability. In order to adapt to such demands, the teaching model of higher education should evolve with the times.

### **2.2 The Role of Intercultural Communication in Students' Comprehensive Development**

Through intercultural communication, students have the opportunity to globalize their perspectives, improve their language skills,

and enhance the diversity of their ways of thinking and values. Interaction with classmates and teachers from different cultural backgrounds can bring more new knowledge and ideas, and students can therefore better understand and accept different ideas, which is very helpful to improve students' critical thinking and innovation ability. In addition, in order to adapt to the needs of modern society, it is necessary to develop students' ability to communicate with team members who have different cultural backgrounds, which will make students more competitive and team-oriented in the workplace and become the talents needed in modern society. In a study by Lu Zhi (2018), it is important to cultivate foreign language talents institutionally and innovatively in the midst of China's reconstructed development model, and intercultural communication plays an important role in this process.

## **3. Intercultural Communication in Larger Classes**

### **3.1 Definition and Characteristics of Larger Classes**

In larger classes, the pace and mode of instruction is usually teacher-driven. Teachers are responsible for conveying information, while students are passive listeners and receivers. The teacher has absolute authority and imparts knowledge to all students in a fixed and uniform way. In this type of class and mode of teaching, students are able to systematically acquire the main content of knowledge.

### **3.2 Advantages and Disadvantages of Larger Class Sizes in Intercultural Education**

Larger classes face more challenges than advantages when it comes to intercultural education than smaller classes. Larger classes mean that teachers are better able to ensure that the content is standardized and systematized so that more knowledge is passed on to students. But because of this, while passively receiving information, students lack opportunities for interaction and discussion, which naturally makes intercultural communication difficult.

If the goal is to maximize knowledge acquisition, larger classes may be a good idea.

However, in intercultural communication, which emphasizes diversity, communication, and mutual influence, the time and opportunities for students to participate in class are unfortunately limited, and even if the teacher intentionally encourages students to express their opinions or spends part of the time in group discussion, a significant number of students will choose to remain silent in the process, believing that there will always be others who are more willing to take the initiative to speak up in a larger class. In this case, students may understand some of the principles of intercultural communication on a theoretical and intellectual level, but they lack the opportunity to learn the relevant skills.

#### **4. Intercultural Communication in Smaller Class Sizes**

##### **4.1 Definition and Characteristics of Smaller Class Sizes**

Smaller class sizes usually refer to classes with a small size, generally under 20 students, emphasizing interaction between teachers and students. The classroom atmosphere is more relaxed and open, with teachers not only being knowledge transmitters but also guides and facilitators of students' learning.

##### **4.2 Advantages and Disadvantages of Smaller Classes in Intercultural Education**

The advantage of smaller classes lies in their strong interactivity, providing students with more opportunities to participate in discussions and share personal views. This open classroom environment helps cultivate students' intercultural communication skills. Xu Jingxue (2013) pointed out in her research that small-class teaching can promote effective student learning in practice. Its disadvantage is the higher requirements for teachers, who need to possess professional knowledge and good interaction and communication skills, and be able to teach according to students' abilities, requiring more teaching resources.

Smaller classes enhance students' intercultural communication skills by increasing teacher-student interaction, peer learning, and cooperative projects, providing more practice opportunities and interactive scenarios. Through group discussions, project cooperation, and cultural sharing sessions, students can not only understand theoretical

knowledge of different cultures but also improve their intercultural adaptability and communication skills through actual exchanges and interactions.

#### **5. Comparison of Intercultural Communication between Larger and Smaller Classes**

##### **5.1 Teaching Goals and Student Development**

The teaching goals in larger classes lean towards knowledge transmission, emphasizing systematicness and standardization, whereas smaller classes emphasize the holistic development of students, particularly in intercultural communication and cooperation skills. When larger class sizes often neglect the cultivation of students' autonomous learning and inquiry abilities, smaller classes through in-class and extracurricular interaction and cooperation, better promote the comprehensive development of students.

##### **5.2 Teacher Roles and Teaching Methods**

In larger classes, teachers primarily act as knowledge transmitters, with lecturing being the main teaching method. In smaller class sizes, teachers not only transmit knowledge but also act as guides and facilitators. The teaching methods are more diverse, including discussions, interactions, and cooperative learning. Jiang Meihong (2022) pointed out that in small-class teaching, teachers can more flexibly adjust teaching content and methods according to students' needs.

##### **5.3 Student Participation and Interaction**

In larger classes, student participation is relatively low, with a focus on teacher lectures and passive information reception by students. Smaller class sizes through group discussions, project cooperation, and classroom interactions, increase student participation and proactivity, providing more opportunities for practice and interaction, which aids in the development of students' intercultural communication skills.

##### **5.4 Intercultural Communication Opportunities**

As mentioned earlier, larger classes provide opportunities for intercultural communication at the knowledge level. Students in larger classes can efficiently gain knowledge related

to it, build basic cognition, and understand the principles. This enables them to understand the why and how of intercultural communication. And as Gao Yuan (2024) pointed out in his study, through actual interaction, students can better understand and adapt to different cultures, thus improving intercultural communication skills. In smaller classes, this knowledge and principles will be practically applied and practiced. Students have more opportunities to speak, interact, and present themselves, which will make it more likely that every student in a small class will participate.

## **6. Recommendations for Optimizing Teaching Models to Enhance Intercultural Communication Effectiveness**

### **6.1 Strategies for Promoting Smaller Classes Sizes in Higher Education**

Promoting more smaller classes in higher education requires support from several sources. For example, it requires universities to hire more specialized teachers, build more classrooms and teaching materials suitable for smaller classes, and design curriculum platforms tailored to smaller classes. At this stage, such a large investment of resources may be a problem for most Chinese universities, but while maintaining the original larger class sizes, experimenting with smaller classes in the light of practical needs may be a good start.

### **6.2 Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms for Intercultural Communication Skills**

In the process of reforming teaching methods, attention should also be paid to the evaluation system of teaching results. Intercultural communication involves many areas and levels, how to evaluate students' intercultural communication competence and the role of the course on students' competence requires teachers to design a comprehensive evaluation system and feedback mechanism to provide timely support for students. For example, comprehensive evaluation can be carried out through class performance, project reports, and specific performance in intercultural communication programs.

### **6.3 Comprehensive Intercultural Communication Projects and Activities**

Intercultural communication is not limited to the classroom. Trips that include students from different cultural backgrounds, arts and crafts, cultural performances, and study abroad can all be sources for students to acquire intercultural communication skills. Universities should use their platforms and resources to provide opportunities for students.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study contrasts the use of large and small classes in Chinese higher education and their advantages and disadvantages in intercultural communication, highlighting the differences between the two different class sizes in promoting intercultural communicative competence among higher education students. Overall, larger classes are conducive to the transmission of systematic knowledge, but limit the opportunities for student interaction and communication; smaller classes place higher demands on teachers and teaching resources, but encourage student participation and interaction in the classroom, which contributes to intercultural communication and students' personal development.

Although this study provides a detailed theoretical analysis of traditional and small-class teaching models, there are certain limitations in practical implementation and empirical validation. Future research can combine actual teaching practices to further validate and refine related theories through empirical studies. Additionally, more specific strategies for optimizing teaching models can be explored to enhance the cultivation of intercultural communication skills in higher education.

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