A Blended Learning Practice of "Flipped Classroom" Mode in Intercultural Communication Course

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Abstract—**This article explores the flipped classroom models in the intercultural communication course developed by educators and students for online learning. Educators adapt to a mixed teaching method combining online and face to face teaching, creating a blended learning environment. Due to the special features of online learning, the key to effective education lies in the focus on students rather than educators while designing the curriculum. In order to improve students' intercultural capabilities, educators use the case analysis method to help students cultivate real-life intercultural communication skills. After looking into students' feedback, we designed a practical and effective teaching plan involving teaching objectives, teaching content, and teaching methods. We guide students to participate in the whole experience process of analyzing real cases and solving problems. The "Performance Culture Approach" method is introduced to students, and students are encouraged to bring actual problems they encountered into the classroom to study. Through the analysis and discussion of real cases, students can find a feasible solution to the problem, so as to avoid communication barriers and successfully conduct intercultural communication.**

Index Terms—**Blended learning, active learning, online learning, flipped classroom, intercultural communication course, performance culture approach.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The movement toward multiculturalism has become a trend with the growing expectations of cultural diversity. "Intercultural Communication" is now a compulsory and popular course for students majoring in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages. It wins a wide audience by using digital technology and broadcasts nowadays, and it also promotes language and culture learning. The goal of teaching Chinese as a second language is to cultivate the intercultural communication competence [1]. The competence of Chinese International education majors needs to be developed by enhancing their sensitivity, tolerance, and flexibility towards different cultures. So students should learn the characteristics, types, modes, elements, and functions of communication. Communication is dynamic, it is an ongoing, ever-changing activity. Communication is interactive, people bring to communication events their own unique background and experiences and interact with each other. Communication takes place in a physical and a social context, under a set of specific physical and social dynamics. Communication is an intricate matrix of acts taking place in a complex social environment that reflects the way people live and how they come to interact with others. Students from different cultures encounter each other during study interaction. They look at the elements and diverse patterns of culture, discuss the relationship between language and culture, learn about verbal and non-verbal communication, focus on the obstacles and difficulties involved in intercultural exchanges. Students also analyze many real intercultural communication cases and pay great attention to the multiculturalism in the context of globalization.

Intercultural communication course aims to improve intercultural education, and enhance international understanding. We try to build a community with different backgrounds from the perspective of intercultural studies. Students will familiarize with concepts, terminologies, theories and skills they are likely encounter in the study, have a good command of different values, world views and behaviors. They can see how culture influences interaction with people of different cultural groups, learn to predict and solve possible problems in real life, eliminate cultural barriers in learning ultimately. For example, the value orientation is concerned with the ways in which people perceive their relationship with others. Collective cultures regard the group as the most important of all social entities. Group affiliations take precedence over individual goals. While individualism culture believes all people should have equal right and complete control over their destiny. In high-context cultures, information is provided through status, gestures, the use of time/space, and even silence. In low-context cultures, the verbal message contains most of the information and very little is embedded in the context or the participants. The effective way to recognize these concepts is analyzing real cases by the method of performance culture approach.

Through Rain Classroom platform, the course is flipped. Personalized learning plans and teaching resources can be customized. Teachers can accurately carry out teaching activities with full-process support, and evaluate learners more scientifically and effectively. Students gradually realize ubiquitous learning is very essential. Teachers arrange course in accordance with students' aptitude. Due to the impact of COVID-19, the intercultural communication course was converted to an online course in the spring of 2020 and resumed normal classes in the classroom in the fall of 2020. Through the comparison between the two versions, we conclude that different methods bring different benefits. Therefore, we introduced the "blended learning" mode to the course in 2021, set up flipped classroom and received good results in the online learning environment. The purpose of this course is to develop intercultural competence in practice. [2] We have carried out four semesters of experimental

courses, covering international students from 36 countries.

II. BLENDED LEARNING

A. From Offline to Online

Compared with the conventional face-to-face classroom teaching, online teaching is more flexible, convenient, targeted and individualized. The essential procedures in offline learning such as course materials, semester assignments, classroom practice and final papers can be done anytime, anywhere in the online learning environment. The most basic definition of blended learning encompasses the possible combination of computer-mediated and face-to-face teaching. It is not a simple juxtaposition of physical presence and technological mediation, but a well-studied alternation of the two, aiming to make the most of the various components and design effective work contexts for both students and teachers [3]. Teachers adopted the mixed method which combined Rain Classroom application, WeChat group, Tencent Conference and public mailbox to execute tasks. Teachers can issue notifications, deliver course text and PowerPoint, provide resources for learning, fulfill classroom management, publish and correct homework, give students evaluation and to receive feedback promptly. Students can get access to curriculum resources such as reading materials, videos, preview topics and homework in the Rain Classroom. Tencent Conference is used for lectures, group discussions, case studies, students' presentation and performance. The WeChat group and public mailbox are used for sharing important files and connecting each other. The combination creates a virtual classroom, deliveries tools and media used to provide information and support interaction. This is a combination of instruction, teaching, learning and contexts.

B. Flipped Classroom

Flipped classroom is not only the flipping of knowledge imparting and knowledge internalization, but also the all-round reform of education concept, teaching content, methods and evaluation [4]. The intercultural communication course currently adopts the "Flipped classroom" mode which integrates the advantages of both offline and online teaching. It not only ensures the face-to-face communication between teachers and students, but also realizes the sharing of online resources and independent learning at anytime and anywhere (ubiquitous learning). It is assured that flipped instruction had an impact on students' learning performance and perceptions. [5]

In our flipped classroom -- "Rain Classroom", students get learning tasks before class, preview learning content and PowerPoint, complete the preview questions. Teachers create a variety of classroom exercises on the teaching platform, such as online voting, objective multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blank questions, and subjective questions. Rain Classroom has automatic grading function, students can get feedback on the exercises before class, and pay more attention on some specific sections during class. Teachers can collect students' common mistakes and add more targeted practices in the following classes. Students are inspired to participate in the case analysis of intercultural communication by problem-guided approach in class. After class, students can review lessons by watching playback at their own convenience, submit homework and prepare for next class. Students can also independently monitor their own learning process, more detailed control of the learning objectives of each chapter, and realize their own learning problems and achievements.

Tencent Conference provides opportunity to communication. Students can answer teacher's question directly, rise questions or deliver opinions to teachers on-site. Group discussion, problem case analysis and presentation are appealing.

III. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COURSE

The UNESCO call that education should not only focus on the acquisition of knowledge but also on "learning to live together", "living together" and "dialogue" are key words in policies and curricula for education. And "intercultural" has gone from being an emergent concept to being part of much mainstream policy discussion and the discourse of theory and practice in education worldwide [6]. The intercultural communication course is designed for both Chinese students and foreign students. The ideal class is a multicultural class. Students from all different cultural backgrounds get together, express their views freely, understand each other and respect everyone. This class looks like a small United Nations. The target of this course is promoting students' social competence to communicate with different people and understand different cultures.

Some experts focus their attention on how people adapt to a new and unfamiliar cultural environment and how their communication activities influence their adaption [7]. It is now generally believed that adapting to a foreign environment is a complicated process, especially one with completely different language, traditions, social complex and culture. Encountering difficulties in adapting to such new environments may result in psychological problems like anxiety and depression. This course is aimed at helping students adapt quickly to different environments by providing real-case solutions and problem-solving discussions in a friendly atmosphere.

Knowledge and skill in intercultural communication are critical in meeting the demands of an integrated society and world. Most colleges require students to take intercultural communication course with research-based or experience-based perspectives. This course explains practical application, discusses ethics and other hot topics. It not only requires student to think critically about issues but asks them personally to shape the future of the field [8]. This course attempts help students raise an open-minded, willful, and positive personality that will continually benefit them in future life.

The attendants of the course include Chinese and foreign graduate students. They formed Chinese--foreign study cooperation groups to jointly carry out intercultural communication practical activities. While learning the theory of intercultural communication in the classroom, Chinese and foreign students firstly work together to express their understanding and ideas on the basic theories and principles.

Then the student group would select a topic and make a group presentation or report. In practice they were very creative and tell a lot of real stories by performing a small play and making short videos. These kinds of activities can reflect many real cases of intercultural communication in real life, enabling the class to analyze the causes of problems and find solutions. For Chinese and foreign students, they can not only understand and solve problems in intercultural communication with theory and practice, but also feel real contradictions and conflicts in the interaction, enhance the awareness and skills of intercultural communication, and effectively improve intercultural communication ability.

A. Teaching Philosophy

The teaching philosophy of this course is student-centered and teacher-guided. Intercultural communication class has a specialized purpose and designed to suit the needs. The main goal of the class is to teach students how to achieve intercultural communication, how to analyze situations in a different culture background and then find solutions independently. On the process of improving communication skills, students would reach their own conclusions. To achieve this goal, teachers should provide suitable teaching content which can arouse students' interest, help students to solve practical problems in intercultural communication, and design teaching activities to improve students' cognitive and thinking ability. Students should gain a certain understanding of general intercultural phenomena, and have the ability to enumerate and analyze them. Teachers should also provide students with further guidance in the topic, adequate learning resources, and encourage students to explore deeper research independently by using pictures, videos, cases, survey report results, etc.

B. Main Teaching Methods

The main teaching methods are as follows: interactive teaching and task-based teaching.

Interactive teaching method. The interactive teaching mode of this course is mainly reflected in two aspects: teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction. From the perspective of teacher-student interaction, the discussion and case analysis after watching the warm-up video can provide students with more opportunities to express their views, create a relaxed communication environment, and promote more interaction between teachers and students. From the perspective of student-student interaction, because the course is aimed at students from different cultural backgrounds, it is natural that there are a lot of information differences and thinking differences among students. Through group discussion and classroom Q&A, a fully designed teaching link will go smoothly. Students can have thinking collision, so as to form an active class atmosphere and give full play to the maximum effect of interactive learning and cooperative learning.

Task-based teaching method. Group task is one of the communicative activities in language and culture classroom. Group discussion reflects the advantages of Task-based teaching in intercultural communication courses: 1. It is task-centered, aims to solve practical problems, and has real communication characteristics. 2. Combine the discussion of topics with the use of language forms. 3 Improve the frequency and quality of students' interaction and negotiation in language. Group activities can reduce students' anxiety and enhance students' motivation and interest in learning language and culture. In this process, teachers play the role of organizers and promoters: 1. Make task lists for students is the concretization and visualization of each task. 2 List the words and expressions that students need to use to complete the task, so that students can highlight their communicative awareness and complete the communicative task.

C. Teaching Principles

Teaching principles are focus on adapting to the language level of students, combining cultural teaching with the improvement of language ability.

Although the focus of intercultural communication class is not Chinese language knowledge (in order to promote students' understanding of the meaning of necessary concepts), it is necessary for teachers to take into account the students' language level when designing curriculum, and explain cultural words and specific expressions that are unfamiliar to students. And combine cultural learning with language expression training to promote the organic combination of form and meaning. When discussing cultural differences and intercultural communication conflicts, teachers consciously add relevant special vocabulary and language expressions. For example, when talking about stereotypes and prejudices, teachers use videos to introduce concepts and topics, list relevant proper nouns, idioms, old sayings, etc., so that students can understand the specific words and expressions. It is a great help for students to successfully understand more new vocabulary, and do more application of language usage. In addition, in order to advance the classroom in an orderly manner and reduce the anxiety of students due to language barriers, it is necessary for teachers to provide a corresponding standard "framework" for language expression, so that students can focus on the completion of communicative tasks, rather than paying much more attention on whether the language used is accurate. For example: There are so many stereotypes and prejudices to Chinese people in varying degrees. Stereotype is a normal mental state, there are positive impressions, and there are also negative impressions. Teachers give students two columns to show the positive and negative points, including some certain words, phrases, sentence patterns, idioms, segmental expression structure and so on, ask students express their ideas freely by using the given words and phrases. Teachers should pay more attention on students' views rather than grammatical errors when students do their presentations.

D. Teaching Innovation

The teaching innovation of this course is the combination of classroom teaching and extracurricular cultural practice, the combination of "performance culture" and speech, debate and investigation, the combination of offline and online learning.

One part of the teaching objects of this course is international students in the target language environment or in their own countries. Teachers give students group tasks in

the very beginning of a semester, students must complete the group tasks in real language environment in target language. So that the students can apply and test the knowledge they have learned by accomplishing the group tasks, and get in touch with real Chinese people and society, and narrow the psychological distance between students and China. For those students in their own country, they certainly have no target language environment, but they can have Chinese language partner or Chinese peers online. Students from different countries form study groups, each study group includes one or two Chinese students. The discussion mainly revolves around cultural differences and cultural conflicts. Teacher designs typical scenarios of intercultural communication for different countries and cultural backgrounds, focusing on the content of the problem, the cause, the impact, and the solution to the problem. In the final group task session, teachers deepen the target topic of the task on the basis of the knowledge previously learned, and encourage the students to do extracurricular investigations and interviews. The students determine the topic center, obtain unknown information in Chinese, and write a report. At last, their preparation is the fundamentals of oral speech, the outcome is their final presentation and performance. Students compare the survey results with similar phenomena in their own countries, and find out the similarity and universality of various world cultures.

IV. Performance Culture Approach — "Intercultural Communication Audio-Visual Cases"

The teaching concept of intercultural communication course is to take students as the main body, stimulate students' learning motivation and thirst for knowledge, guide students to integrate theory with practice, analyze and discuss intercultural hot issues. The teaching design uses the flipped classroom model to organically combine students' self-study, classroom discussions, group tasks, and real-life simulations to cultivate students' intercultural communication awareness and comprehensively improve students' intercultural communication skills. The teaching feature is to let Chinese and foreign students from different cultural backgrounds work together to solve real cross-cultural communication problems. It plays a role in building the foundation of study and research in the curriculum system.

Performance culture approach is a magnificent way to active students' mindset, critical thinking and analytical ability [9]. Learning to participate in another culture and accumulating knowledge of exotic cultures are two features of the Performance Culture. By performing cases, students use game "Rules" and "Actions" to learn how to make interpersonal communication in Chinese culture. This is a lifelong learning, students get cultural sensitivity gradually.

From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, this teaching method emphasizes the learning of language through the experience and practice of the target language culture. The best testimony to the effectiveness of a pedagogical approach is what its learners can do. It argues that performance culture could affect students' learning [10]. This teaching method believes that language is behavior, and learning a language is to experience and practice the target

culture, requiring students to put themselves in their shoes to think about problems. This method combines the advantages of listening, speaking and communicative function method, teachers create a variety of contextual scenarios for students' autonomous learning, so that students can learn language and gain knowledge in the experience of culture.

For international students, the audio-visual forms of performance used in the classroom can stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning. At the same time, video or animation can show the teaching content to students more intuitively, and students can better understand the case, and the analysis and discussion will be more effective.

Judging from the survey of students, students urgently need audio-visual courseware for intercultural communication. Students love to perform their own plays, especially foreign students. By doing group work and making video with Chinese students together, they are leading roles of small shows, they can better understand the theoretical and practical significance of intercultural communication through the "Video-Audio-Speak" method. However, students may find it hard to reach an agreement when analyzing an intercultural conflict event. Some experts wondered whether the use of video could foster critical reflection which is so difficult to achieve when it comes to observing one's own value and judgment [11].

Based on the actual cases of international students, relevant digital materials are collected to form digital teaching courseware, which can be applied to online classrooms. Teachers use images, animations, videos and other intuitive images to show students the basic content of intercultural communication, especially the problems, misunderstandings and conflicts that occur in the process of intercultural communication. After reflection, students can find solutions or offer suggestions to solve the problems, so as to gain knowledge of intercultural communication, strengthen intercultural communication awareness, and improve intercultural communication skills. It is important to set up a conceptual framework for intercultural communication, and we should devise a method for further explorations of communication according to conceptual framework [12]. This conceptual framework should be regarded as the basement of the collection of digital materials.

Main content of Intercultural Communication includes: Basic theories of intercultural communication, verbal communication, non-verbal communication, social communication, interpersonal relationships, values, barriers to intercultural communication, intercultural adaptation, intercultural communication and second language learning, etc.

The Flipped classroom (combination of student self-study, teacher guidance, and classroom practice) can be the basis for the realization of the teaching plan. The organizational approach to the teaching plan begins with concepts, moves to analysis, examines the role of communication, and end with developing new approaches for presenting extended cases [13]. The course assessment method is flexible, including process-based assessment (preview, classroom participation, scenario simulation, group report, etc.), as well as final term papers. Students are encouraged to watch Chinese movies

and TV, conduct on-the-spot interviews, make questionnaires, perform sketches, record short videos, investigate social phenomena, etc., and apply the knowledge learned in class to practice. The goal of the intercultural communication course is to cultivate students' ability to use Chinese for intercultural communication. After the collection and analysis of teaching practice, the digitization and internationalization of teaching resources are finally realized.

V. Course Evaluation Report

From 2020 spring semester to 2022 spring semester, we offered 10 mixed Intercultural communication classes aimed at foreign and Chinese students for online flipped classroom practices. Students are very active in the training process. The foreign students are eager to preview online resources and communicate with their Chinese peers by social media and online contact before classes, in classes and after classes. So compared with traditional methods, blended learning is more effective.

Here is an ongoing survey on the Blended learning effect of intercultural communication "Flipped classroom". (Started from December 29th, 2021, 118 samples)
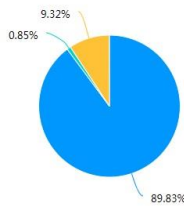

Fig. 1. The necessity of setting up intercultural communication course for undergraduate foreign students.

Fig. 1 shows 89.83% students totally agree to set up Intercultural Communication course for foreign students; 9.32% students vote "if needed"; only 0.85% students think the matter "Not necessary".
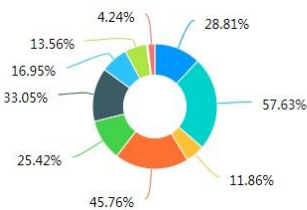

Fig. 2. Favorite online learning platform.

Among several platforms, Fig. 2 shows 57.63% students love Rain Classroom; 45.76% students prefer Tencent Conference, 33.05% students favor the combination of Rain Classroom, Tencent Conference and WeChat Group. 28.81 % chose MOOC as first option; 25.42% love the combination of Rain Classroom and Tencent Conference; 16.95% use Zoom; 13.56% like Dingding; 11.86% only use Tencent Conference; 4.24% chose other platforms.

Fig. 3 shows the main advantages of Rain Classroom: "Learning resources" (66.1%), "Bullet Screen" (65.25%), "Do homework online and get the grade immediately" (65.25%), "Can watch playback" (60.17%), "Online exercise in each lesson" (57.63%). "Preview lessons" (48.31%), "Clear framework" (43.22%).
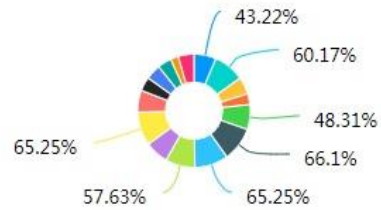

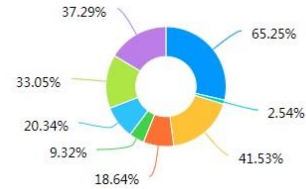Fig. 3. The advantages of the rain classroom.

Fig. 4. Opinion on necessity of preview before class.

Fig. 4 shows 65.25% students totally agree the necessity of preview before class; 41.53% students think it "Depend on time"; 37.29% students believe "The content of preview should be interesting" to be effective; 33.05% students claim "No any pressure, easy task"; 20.34% students believe previews can help them understand the target of lesson; 18.64% students only do previews when teacher ask them to do so; 9.32% students love to get some score by preview; Only 2.54% students believe previews are "Not necessary".
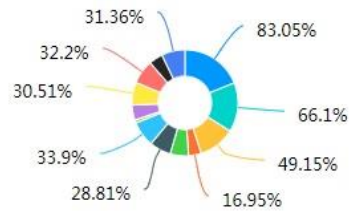

Fig. 5. Opinion on warming-up videos.

Warming-up videos have a great vogue in class. 83.05% students love it very much; 66.1% students want to get more "Case analysis"; 49.15% students are fond of "Free speech" after playing videos; 33.9% students ask for more time to communicate; 32.2% students like "Latest topics"; 31.36% students love to watch short TV Show; 30.51% students want to see more "Different cultures"; 28.81% students love humorous videos; 16.95% students need teacher's guidance as shown in Fig. 5.
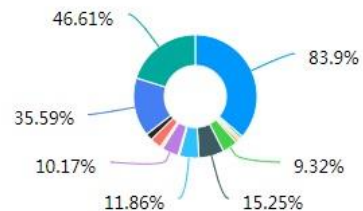

Fig. 6. Whether this course is student-centered, teacher-guided.

As shown in Fig. 6, 83.9% students totally agree that the course is student-centered, teacher-guided. 46.61% students hope there are more time and chance to "Promote Chinese and foreign students exchange"; 35.59% students hope teacher "Design more classroom activities"; 15.25% students prefer more group discussions; 11.86% students want to

cultivate active learning; 10.17% students need more encouragement; 9.32% students ask for more practice .

Fig. 7. Whether this course inspire students' critical thinking, encourage independent learning, and cultivate awareness of intercultural communication.

70.34% students chose "Every time"; 23.73% students chose "Frequently"; and 5.93% students chose "Once in a while". 0% students chose "Seldom" or "Never". As shown in Fig. 7, the result means the course basically achieves the target.
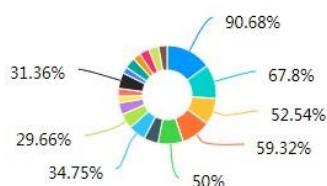

Fig. 8. The advantages of the blended learning in "flipped classroom"

As shown in Fig. 8, the top five of the advantages of the Blended learning are: Combine the advantages of online teaching and classroom teaching(90.68%); Allow students to study independently anytime, anywhere(67.8%); Promote the integration of online learning platform, educational technology and traditional classroom(59.32%); Enhance the breadth and depth of students' self-regulated learning(52.54%); Set students at ease while working at projects (50%); Have more interactions between teachers and students (34.75%); Use more Bullet Screen (31.36%); Have prompt feedback(29.66%).

From the prospective of students' achievement, students' attitude toward Flipped classroom learning has a major, and in this case very positive effect on the students' perception of their academic accomplishments. Formative assessment, when applied in a flipped learning environment, has a positive effect on students' perception of their academic outcomes. The conjunction of these two variables (attitude and formative assessment) best explains students' perception of outcomes [14]. We should go further to work on the positive effects of the Flipped Classroom on the teaching-learning process of students.

VI. CONCLUSION

Based on the practice of the flipped classroom mode in intercultural communication course, the blended learning method has been well accepted by students. With the advantages of online learning, students can get rich resources and targeted exercises from the learning platform, and they also can get prompt responses and other help from teachers individually. At the same time, the Chinese-Foreign students' groups take an important key role in the process of intercultural communication in various online and offline activities. As a virtual classroom, the Rain Classroom

delivers a learning cyberspace environment to students and gets flipped classroom done. This is a task-based effective learning. Students get intercultural sensitivity (affective capacity to recognize, acknowledge, and respect cultural differences), intercultural competence (behavioral ability to adapt to a new cultural) from this course. And the international competence is the only means whereby we can move beyond cultural differences in order to succeed in intercultural interactions [15]. If students get the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction, they obtain the personality strength, communication skills, psychological adaptation and cultural awareness.

In summary, the blended learning mode can combine the advantages of online teaching and classroom teaching, promote the integration of online, offline learning platforms and educational technology. Students acquire self-regulated learning and active learning skills. The Flipped Classroom can help students to learn the intercultural communication course effectively by setting online and offline learning targets and forming Chinese-foreign study cooperation group to jointly conduct practical activities. The student group reports can reflect many real intercultural communication cases in real life, analyze the causes of problems on the spot, and find solutions to problems. Different cultures generate distinctive value systems and perceptions of meaning, students need to investigate the breadth and depth of the impact of culture on communication behavior. Students should understand the reasons other cultures give for their behavior must be accurate understanding of the differences in cognitive structure between cultures. Students can simulate real-life contradictions and conflicts in interactions, enhance the skills of intercultural communication, so they can be better prepared for future interpersonal and social communication, as well as their academic career.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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