

# Foreign Language Education from the Perspective of Mutual Learning among Civilizations: New Concepts and Transformation Paths

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**Abstract:** Amidst the deepening evolution of globalization and the era emphasizing mutual learning among civilizations, foreign language education faces an imperative shift from an “instrumental rationality” towards a “humanistic symbiosis” paradigm. Grounded in the theoretical framework of “civilizational exchanges and mutual learning”, this study critically examines structural deficiencies in traditional foreign language education, including superficial cultural approaches, tendencies toward Western-centrism, and a lack of genuine interaction. It proposes a new conceptual framework centered on bidirectional mutual learning and symbiosis, reshaping three core dimensions: (1) the cultivation of interactive cultural competence, (2) dual-directional value co-communication, and (3) the deep integration of technology empowerment with humanistic concerns. Accordingly, this study recommends constructing a systematic set of transformation pathways: developing a tripartite curriculum ecosystem integrating “language-culture-discourse”; implementing innovative pedagogies involving critical project-based inquiry and cultural translation practice; designing a multidimensional evaluation mechanism focused on intercultural efficacy; and establishing multimodal resource databases and global collaborative platforms. This research provides both theoretical guidance and practical frameworks for enabling foreign language education to serve national international communication capacity building and for cultivating envoys capable of facilitating civilizational dialogue.

**Keywords—foreign language education; mutual learning among civilizations; instrumental rationality; humanistic symbiosis; technology empowerment**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world is undergoing profound and complex historical transformations. Although globalization faces countercurrents and challenges, the deep-seated aspiration for civilizational exchange and mutual learning, as well as the surging tide of deepening cultural integration, has become increasingly irresistible. Language, serving as the core gene of civilization and a crucial carrier of cultural identity, plays an indispensable bridging role in transcending geographical barriers, dissolving cognitive divides, and fostering popular affinity (Hu et al., 2021). For a considerable period, foreign language education has borne the core mission of cultivating communicators within the process of global interconnectedness, acting as fundamental support for nations to engage in global governance, enhance cultural soft power, and promote economic and scientific-technological cooperation. UNESCO (2009)’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity profoundly asserts that linguistic diversity is not only a vital component of humanity’s shared heritage but also a fundamental guarantee for sustaining world peace and dialogical development.

However, an examination of China’s past foreign language education practices reveals that its instrumental function was

excessively reinforced. Goal orientations serving specific political and economic needs became predominant (Wigfield & Cambria, 2010), while the profound connotations of acting as a “cultural bridge” and the strategic value as a “civilizational bond” were largely narrowed or obscured. This structural deficiency has resulted in the underdevelopment of foreign language education’s cultural edification dimension and its potential to facilitate deep civilizational dialogue, urgently necessitating new philosophical guidance and practical reconstruction.

Under the guidance of the vision of “building a community with a shared future for mankind,” the concept of “civilizational exchange and mutual learning” offers a significant Chinese perspective for transcending the discourse of “clash of civilizations” and redefining inter-civilizational relations in the era of globalization (Li, 2017). This concept emphasizes respect for the diversity and equal value of global civilizations, advocating an open and inclusive mindset to seek intrinsic harmony through mutual understanding amidst differences and achieve enduring momentum for shared development through mutual learning. This philosophically rich idea provides crucial theoretical insights and value orientation for positioning foreign language education in this new historical era.

Examined from the perspective of “civilizational exchange and mutual learning”, the limitations inherent in previous foreign language education models become increasingly evident. Notable issues include: the superficiality of cultural cognition driven by instrumental rationality (e.g., focusing only on superficial customs and etiquette); an implicit tendency towards unidirectional cultural inculcation (neglecting the confident expression of China’s core culture and the cultivation of cultural dissemination capacity); and traditional teaching methods severely lacking in interactivity and dialogue (Henrich et al., 2023; Singh, 2022). Consequently, transforming the conception of foreign language education from merely cultivating “language skills” to deeply fostering “intercultural competence and cultural confidence dissemination” and shifting the pedagogical paradigm from “unidirectional reception” towards “bidirectional mutual learning and symbiosis” have become fundamental imperatives (Wu, 2024). These changes respond to the demands of the times, empower national discourse capacity in international engagement, and contribute to the shaping of a new form of human civilization.

Confronted with this profound historical transformation, actively exploring and defining its pathways is not only crucial for the innovative development of foreign language education itself but also represents a vital exercise of practical consciousness in serving the broader contours of national strategy and optimizing the knowledge structure of talent resources.

## 2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Civilizational Exchange and Mutual Learning

The concept of “civilizational exchange and mutual learning” provides expansive and profound Chinese wisdom for understanding civilizational relations in the era of globalization. This concept encompasses two complementary core dimensions: (1) Inclusiveness and equality. This dimension thoroughly negates notions of “civilizational superiority” and “cultural centralism”, asserting that all civilizations possess intrinsic value and the right to equal dignity. (2) Dynamic co-becoming. This principle posits that the vitality and vigor of civilizations stem from active interaction, mutual learning, and symbiotic development, rather than from isolation or confrontation (Upadhyay, 2023).

The core spirit of this Chinese concept resonates highly with instruments such as the UNESCO convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions (Schorlemer & Stoll, 2012) and numerous documents on intercultural dialogue (e.g., UNESCO, 2009). Collectively, these texts point to a new vision that transcends instrumental rationality and is grounded in the deep integration of humanistic values.

Specifically within the educational domain, this concept fosters in-depth dialogue with research on intercultural competence. The influential “Intercultural Communicative Competence” model proposed by Byram (1997) emphasizes

the integration of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical cultural awareness, with a particular focus on understanding the other’s perspective. Kramersch’s (1993) theory of the “Third Place” concentrates on the emergence of new perspectives and competencies that transcend binary oppositions among language and culture learners encountering diversity.

While these Western theories offer profound insights into the individual cognitive and psychological mechanisms involved in intercultural interaction, their attention to historical contexts, power structures, and their systematic impact on meaning negotiation requires further development (Kubota, 2004). The theory of civilizational exchange and mutual learning, with its robust historical horizon, egalitarian ontological stance, and particularly its emphasis on the confident dissemination of China’s subjective cultural consciousness (Wang & Zhao, 2023), affirms the strengths of these theories in delineating individual competency development. Simultaneously, it provides essential guidance for constructing a new, more historically nuanced, power-sensitive, and reciprocally balanced theoretical paradigm.

### 2.2 Critical Reflection

Through the lens of mutual learning among civilizations, the structural contradictions and limitations inherent in traditional foreign language education models have become increasingly evident, forming a focal point for theoretical critique. First, the predominance of “instrumental rationality” constitutes the primary theoretical target of criticism. Habermas (1984) offered a profound warning regarding the expansion of “instrumental rationality” and its encroachment upon “communicative rationality”. Theories such as linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), the critical applied linguistics analyses of Pennycook (1994, 2001), and Kumaravadivelu’s (2003) post-method pedagogy jointly contend that mainstream foreign language education practices have long exhibited a tendency to reductively present language as an apolitical, ahistorical communicative tool. This tendency confines teaching content largely to superficial linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation) and limited cultural knowledge (e.g., customs and etiquette of the target culture), serving short-term political-economic objectives. Crucially, it obscures the complex role of language as a form of cultural practice, a medium for identity construction (mediating power), and a site for the negotiation of power (Fedorenko et al., 2024). Secondly, the notion of “unidirectional cultural transfer” faces significant theoretical challenges. Postcolonial theory (e.g., Bhabha, 1994) and cultural studies have long engaged in deconstructing the Western-centric presumptions underlying knowledge and cultural transmission. Within traditional foreign language classrooms, target cultures (particularly Western cultures) are frequently uncritically elevated as idealized “templates”, manifesting unidirectional cultural inculcation and an implicit “muting of the learners’ native cultural voice” (Mikhaleva & Régnier, 2014). These classrooms perpetuate static representations framed as “cultural authenticity” (Kramersch,

1998), thereby masking the inherent plurality, fluidity, and power dynamics within cultures. This fundamentally suppresses the linguistic learners' cultural agency and their capacity for interpreting and disseminating their native cultures. Thirdly, the "lack of depth and breadth in interaction" within competence development also faces theoretical interrogation. Current frameworks of intercultural competence, while emphasizing interaction, frequently confine practical interaction to the level of "skill acquisition" or "superficial empathy". A critical deficiency lies in the absence of institutional platforms and discursive spaces that support genuine "equal dialogue" (Chen & Starosta, 2005). Consequently, these approaches inadequately prompt learners to critically reflect on their own "linguacultural identities" (Pavlenko, 2007) and are ineffective in cultivating the praxis necessary for constructing and disseminating Chinese discourse narratives. This creates a pronounced tension between individual competence development and national strategic needs.

### **2.3 Integration and Transgression: New Theoretical Explorations for Foreign Language Education Transformation**

Confronted with the aforementioned challenges and the new demands of civilizational dialogue, explorations that integrate the core spirit of mutual learning among civilizations, deepen insights from critical theories, and incorporate cutting-edge educational philosophies are burgeoning within foreign language education research, constructing the theoretical bedrock for transformation.

The first category of research focuses on reshaping the value system and objectives of foreign language education. Sun et al. (2022) systematically proposes the "Global Competence Model 2.0", emphasizing the balanced development of "integration of Chinese and global cultures" and "effective dissemination of Chinese culture". This model underscores the unification of "effective intercultural communication" and "confident identity expression" through foreign language education. Sun et al. (2022) stressed the need to deeply integrate "ideological and political elements" as the spiritual core of curriculum construction. The research group led by Chen (2025) concentrates on building "national language capacity" and "international communication competence", which emphasized that foreign language education should shoulder the core responsibility of facilitating the "construction of a strategic national communication system" and promote the cultivation of strategic communication talents capable of "communicating China's narrative effectively".

The second category of research centers on profound pedagogical innovation in concepts and paradigms. Drawing on theories of "Interculturality" (Dervin, 2016; Holliday, 2019), which specifically highlights the dynamic negotiation of meaning arising from interaction between cultures, researchers advocate for pedagogy that focuses on creating intersubjective dialogic spaces. This signifies a shift from

traditional "transmission of cultural knowledge" to practices fostering "cultural understanding and co-construction of meaning" (Byram et al., 2002). Methods such as "cultural translation", "critical comparative analysis", and "project-based intercultural collaboration" are promoted to deconstruct cultural stereotypes and facilitate genuine "mutual enhancement via encounter".

The third category of research emphasizes the embedded value of curriculum-based ideological education, understanding China, and patriotic sentiment. For instance, Wang and Wei (2022) proposes highlighting "cultural consciousness" and "civilizational rootedness" within language pedagogy, who advocated constructing a pedagogical resource and activity framework centered on the axis of clarifying China's rationale, expounding Chinese values, and demonstrating China's discursive power.

Collectively, these explorations form an emerging theoretical framework, increasingly robust in scale and scope. It guides the transformation of foreign language education from a model dominated by "skill acquisition" towards one equally emphasizing "intercultural literacy and communicative capability", and from "unidirectional adaptation" to a new ecosystem of "bidirectional mutual learning and symbiosis". This framework provides a solid academic foundation for designing practical pathways for transformation.

## **3. NEW CONCEPTS AND TRANSFORMATION PATHWAYS**

### **3.1 The Core Connotation of the New Concept: From Instrumental Rationality to Bidirectional Mutual Learning and Symbiosis**

Profoundly guided by the concept of "civilizational exchange and mutual learning", contemporary foreign language education must urgently undergo a paradigmatic shift. This entails moving beyond singular skill training and unidirectional cultural transmission towards prioritizing deep intercultural symbiotic competence alongside bidirectional value dissemination. This new conceptual framework can be distilled into the following key dimensions:

(1) Deep Generation of Interactive Cultural Competence. The goal of foreign language education must transcend mastery of the surface-level symbolic system of the "target language". Instead, it should cultivate learners' multidimensional literacy grounded in "Interculturality", encompassing:

**Critical Cultural Awareness:** The capacity to identify the power relations, ideologies, and historical contexts embedded within linguistic and cultural representations (Kubota, 2004).

**Dynamic Mutual Interpretation:** The ability, in authentic intercultural contexts, to deeply comprehend the cultural logic and values of the other, while clearly articulating the underlying rationale of one's own cultural standpoint, facilitating the co-creation of new understanding through comparative reflection (Pennycook, 2001).

Creative Cultural Transformation: The capacity to identify, select, and effectively integrate valuable elements from other civilizations based on one's native cultural foundation, serving the resolution of shared human concerns and the promotion of universal human values (Holliday, 2019).

(2) Bidirectional Synergistic Value Dissemination. Foreign language education should discard the implicit tendency towards cultural self-diminishment inherent in the "Acculturation" paradigm. Instead, it must enable learners to become active agents in equal cultural exchange and confident narrators of Chinese civilizational values and ideas. The learning process should achieve not only "understanding the world", but more crucially, "representing China" and "contributing wisdom". This represents a fundamental transformation from "input-dominance" to an "input-output dynamic equilibrium and symbiosis" of cultural value (Wang & Wei, 2022).

(3) Integration of Tech-Empowerment and Humanistic Depth. Digital technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence, VR/AR, corpora, online international learning exchange platforms) hold immense potential for creating immersive language-culture environments, expanding interaction dimensions, and enhancing the precision of cultural analysis. However, their application must be subservient to deepening humanistic understanding, fostering equal dialogue, and stimulating cultural creativity (Cain et al., 2016). They must not degenerate into instruments for superficial skill drills or become new instruments of technological control.

### 3.2 Exploring Practical Pathways for Systemic Transformation

Building upon the new conceptual framework outlined above, the systemic transformation of foreign language education necessitates a coordinated set of practical pathways centered on the holistic restructuring of curriculum systems, pedagogical paradigms, assessment mechanisms, and resource environments.

Firstly, we need to restructure the curriculum system and establish the value guidance and multidimensional dialogue framework. Breaking away from older modular structures that segregated language skills and cultural content, we must construct a multidimensional curriculum ecosystem. This ecosystem integrates the deep fusion of "language-culture-discourse", facilitates historical interconnectedness between "China and the World", and fosters mutual illumination between "Classics and the Contemporary". Key components include: (1) Introducing new modules focused on deep understanding and bidirectional interpretation, such as "translation and dissemination practices of excellent Chinese culture", "critical readings in transcivilizational classics", "comparative discourse analysis of Chinese and global perspectives on international issues", and "intensive regional and country studies" (Sun et al., 2022); (2) Pervasively integrating "understanding China" as a core thread throughout the entire curriculum. Within language training, literary

readings, translation practices, and other components, systematically embed high-quality corpus materials and interpretative frameworks that distinctly manifest contemporary China's developmental achievements, core values (e.g., community with a shared future for mankind), and the essence of traditional thought (e.g., harmony in diversity); and (3) Strengthening the deep, organic integration of curriculum-based ideological and political elements, internalizing cultural confidence, a civilizational exchange and mutual learning perspective, and a historical materialism viewpoint within teaching objectives and content design.

Secondly, we need to innovate the pedagogical paradigm. The pedagogical core must shift towards creating highly interactive classroom cultures characterized by deep negotiation and the potential generative capacity of a "Third Space". This entails: (1) Promoting "critical project-based comparative inquiry". For example, organizing students to trace the origins and conceptual evolution of ideas (e.g., "common prosperity" vs. "inclusive growth"), analyze policies, examine public discourse, and collaboratively design multilingual dissemination strategies for local solutions related to globally shared challenges like "rural revitalization", "ecological governance", and "ethics of technological innovation" (Byram et al., 2002). (2) Deepening "cultural translation pedagogy". We should treat translation as a profound activity of cultural "transgression" (Cronin, 2003), guide students to dissect the cultural presuppositions and discursive struggles embedded within texts, and actively practice the competitive international translanguaging practices for core Chinese concepts and narrative frameworks (e.g., "peaceful development"). (3) Strategically utilizing technology to build "embodied intercultural fields". We should employ VR/AR to reconstruct historical/real cultural contexts, technology-driven intercultural dialogue simulation platforms, and big-data-based multimodal cultural discourse analysis tools to enhance the authenticity of cultural experiences, the frequency of interaction, and the depth of reflection.

Thirdly, we need to shift assessment mechanisms. Assessment criteria need to move away from emphasizing formal linguistic accuracy towards evaluating depth of intercultural understanding, quality of cultural analysis, effectiveness of cultural dissemination and communication, and contribution to value co-creation. This involves: (1) Implementing process portfolios based on authentic tasks, tracking and documenting students' cognitive progression and practical outcomes in intercultural project collaboration, multilingual cultural interpretation, and the expression of Chinese discourse. (2) Designing simulated practice-field assessments involving multiple stakeholders (e.g., simulating speeches at international institutions, chairing intercultural negotiations, planning cultural export strategies), with particular attention to assessing the ability to articulate Chinese perspectives effectively within international normative frameworks. (3) Leveraging technology-enabled intelligent assessment. For instance, we can explore natural language

processing (NLP)-based models for analyzing intercultural communication strategies or identifying tendencies in cultural attitudes/values to provide more nuanced and individualized competency diagnostics.

Fourthly, achieving synergistic integration and intelligent collaboration necessitates leveraging resource environments. This includes constructing integrated multimodal resource libraries that consolidate authoritative multilingual interpretations of Chinese culture, globally significant classic texts from diverse civilizations, and multimedia national image corpora reflecting a “Polyphonic China”. It also requires developing globally collaborative teaching, research, and learning platforms which utilize cloud connectivity to link domestic and overseas university faculty and students with field experts (such as those from international organizations and foreign media), enabling regular online co-teaching sessions, joint research projects, and virtual cultural exchanges. Furthermore, we need to establish digital, intelligent teaching spaces employing educational big data and learning analytics to dynamically optimize instructional pathways, provide personalized cultural context guidance, and facilitate deep feedback through human-computer collaboration.

Only through these comprehensive and multidimensional transformation pathways can foreign language education genuinely fulfill its historical mission in the era of civilizational exchange and mutual learning: linking hearts, connecting wisdom, and co-creating value.

#### 4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

As the concept of “civilizational exchange and mutual learning” profoundly anchors the trajectory of foreign language education transformation and initial explorations progress, future research must exert sustained effort in deepening theoretical connotation, overcoming practical bottlenecks, and addressing techno-ethical challenges. This commitment is vital for providing a solid academic foundation and practical guidance to construct a systematic, effective, and future-oriented new ecosystem for foreign language education.

Firstly, there is an urgent need to deepen the exploration of the micro-mechanisms underpinning the fusion of the civilizational exchange and mutual learning philosophy with foreign language teaching practices. While current research has outlined new conceptual frameworks and macro-level pathways, the specific transformative mechanisms by which particular cultural and value symbols are converted into learner-internalizable, operationalizable, and disseminable intercultural competency modules within bidirectional interactive teaching require meticulous dissection (Akoka et al., 2024). Methods such as design-based research and ethnography of classroom discourse should be employed to delve deeply into the ways cultural meaning is negotiated among teachers and students, and between students themselves, within “bidirectional mutual learning and symbiotic” classrooms. Particularly crucial is investigating

how learners’ embodied cognition in VR/AR-facilitated embodied intercultural fields contributes to the reconstruction of cultural understanding and the promotion of value co-creation.

Secondly, research into the double-edged sword effects of digital technology empowerment and its governance is imperative. While technology-driven large-scale personalized learning platforms and algorithm-driven cultural content filtering mechanisms enhance efficiency, they simultaneously harbor risks. Urgent research into techno-ethics is required to clarify the boundaries and regulatory frameworks for technology application under the “human-centered” principle. Exploring the construction of intelligent learning environments characterized by high algorithmic transparency safeguarding cultural diversity is essential to ensure technology serves deep mutual learning without usurping the core place of humanistic values (Mavrikis & Holmes, 2019).

Another critical direction for future research lies in empirical and remedial studies aimed at building a multi-level collaborative support system to facilitate the implementation of this transformation.

(1) Addressing the critical bottlenecks in the structural upgrading of teacher competencies is paramount. The knowledge structures of many frontline teachers remain confined to traditional language and literature systems, resulting in significant gaps in their own “intercultural mutual learning competence” and “capacity for disseminating Chinese discourse” (Sun et al., 2022). Urgently required are studies grounded in the reconceptualized role of “teachers as intercultural mediators” to develop a “civilizational mutual learning-oriented foreign language teacher competency framework” (Dervin, 2016). Transformative teacher development programs, implemented through models like immersive transnational teaching-research communities and university-international organization joint training bases, need empirical research to dismantle endogenous resistance within the teaching force.

(2) There is a pressing need to develop dynamic evaluation indicator systems aligned with the goals of bidirectional mutual learning. Traditional standardized language tests (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS) remain confined to skill dimensions; thus, there is an urgent need to create multi-dimensional assessment toolkits capable of accurately measuring core competencies such as “depth of cultural comprehension”, “ability to express critical cultural stances”, and “multilingual communication efficacy on China-related issues” (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). This involves process-oriented and value-added assessment, based on big data analytics, of learners’ outputs from intercultural projects (e.g., collaborative solutions, cultural translation products) and multimodal discursive practices (e.g., simulated international addresses, social media cultural narratives).

(3) Research into the equitable allocation of resources, viewed through regional and international collaborative

governance lenses, must be strengthened. Vigilance is needed against “digital-cultural resource accessibility disparities” arising from regional economic divides and institutional stratification in transformation practices. Exploring the establishment of a state-led open multilingual resource repository for civilizational dialogue and “smart support alliances” between institutions in eastern and western regions is essential. This ensures the transformation towards a civilizational mutual learning-oriented foreign language education does not become the privilege of elite institutions, but evolves into a universally accessible endeavor promoting educational equity and shared human well-being (Lei & Wang, 2023).

Through persistent cultivation of these forward-looking and pivotal research agendas, the “civilizational exchange and mutual learning” can transcend its status as a grand vision and become a robust bridge, genuinely cultivating globally-minded foreign language talents and fostering communication for humanity’s shared future.

## 5. CONCLUSION

From the perspective of mutual learning among civilizations, foreign language education urgently needs to transcend the traditional paradigm dominated by instrumental rationality and shift towards a new conceptual framework centered on mutual learning and mutual development.

This study proposes that foreign language education should: (1) establish an interactive cultural competence development system, strengthening capabilities in critical cultural cognition, dynamic mutual interpretation, and creative cultural transformation; (2) promote two-way collaborative value communication, balancing the dual outputs of understanding the world and articulating China; and (3) deepen the integration of technology empowerment with humanistic values, avoiding the alienation caused by technological instrumentalization.

The transformation pathway demands a systematic restructuring of curricula, pedagogy, assessment, and support resources, such as anchoring curricula in the coordinates of civilizational dialogue through integrative courses deeply merging language, culture, and discourse; innovating pedagogical models through critical project-based inquiry, cultural translation practice, and creating intelligent learning environments; replacing singular skill testing with process-based portfolios and communication efficacy evaluation; breaking down cultural barriers with multimodal resource databases and global collaborative platforms.

This study translates the philosophical concept of mutual learning among civilizations into an operational framework for foreign language education. Its practical significance lies in providing a systematic solution to enhance China’s international communication capacity and cultivate innovative talents possessing both cultural confidence and global competence.

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