

College English Teaching from the Perspective of the Unity Between Man and Nature – Taking College English of BIPT as an Example

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Received in revised form: 13 Oct 2023;

Accepted: 15 Nov 2023;

Available online: 24 Nov 2023

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Keywords – college English teaching, the unity between man and nature, course design, traditional Chinese culture

The unity between man and nature, as is touched upon in literature, is a classic concept in traditional Chinese philosophy. This paper, starting from the proposal of the concept, after briefing the studies in related fields, elucidates the important role it plays in modern course design, focusing on how to integrate it into the practice of college English teaching, concerning the specific steps of course construction: top-level design, selection of teaching materials, appropriate teaching methods, and improvement of evaluation system, for students to deeply understand the essence of traditional Chinese culture in the process of language learning, for the purpose of cultivating their own cultural confidence to better shoulder the task of inheriting Chinese culture. The teaching practice substantiates the effectiveness of the course reform, making up for the shortcoming of traditional English education and providing a certain reference for the integration of English learning into the education of traditional Chinese culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

The unity between man and nature, as a concept, originates in the period of the Pre-Qin Dynasty. Its earliest version is called *aliqueness* between man and nature. The concept is systematically elucidated by the great philosopher Dong Zhongshu in the West Han Dynasty. At that time, it, together with the theory of *Yin-Yang* and *Five Elements*, builds the firm foundation of the ruling thought of the Han Dynasty.

Dong's proposal of *aliqueness* between man and

nature, is a constant proposition in the field of philosophy as well as culture. In Dong's opinion, nature is the heaven which generates all the things. This heaven has three layers of connotations. One layer is that the heaven represents the collection of all kinds of supreme beings. The second understanding is that the heaven refers to the whole universe that can be perceived by man. The last one is that the heaven is an integral part of the universe.

From the perspective of Dong, the heaven is the representation of supreme goodness with its own

consciousness, and is the supreme dominator in the universe. It dominates the world by rewarding the good and punishing the evil. Man, the transcript of the heaven and the earth, alike to the heaven, is generated by means of the changes of *Yin-Yang* and *Five Elements* in the universe, occupying a prominent position and conspicuous attributes. Man is the successor of the heaven, to accomplish the tasks designated by the heaven. In this relationship, man does not merely receive orders from the heaven passively, but with a certain initiative. In the Warring States Period, in the classic theoretical work – *Yi Zhuan (Commentaries on the Changes)*, the heaven, the earth, and man are considered to be three talents, indicating clearly the position of human beings among the three (Zhang, 1985). The heaven, the earth and man are interdependent, and indispensable to the unity of the three. This manifests that the universe is composed of a variety of elements which check and coordinate with each other, among which, the heaven, the earth and man comprise the greater majority.

To conclude, the heaven and man have connections as well as differentiations, while man occupies a remarkable position, which is the consensus achieved among the philosophers in ancient times. The behaviors of man should be in conformity with the will of the heaven, whereas man has his own initiatives. Ancient philosophers realize the significance of adjusting human behaviors to accommodate nature. The unity (acknowledged name) between man and nature is substantially the harmony between man and his living environments, concerning the physical and mental harmony, interpersonal harmony and the harmony between man and the environment. This understanding of unity can guide educators and teachers in the cultural construction of college English, providing solutions to some knotty problems in teaching fields, which would benefit our exploration of the rules of course design and college English teaching. Though the concept has always been criticized to be idealistic in some aspects, it virtually produces conspicuous outcomes in modern teaching environments. This constitutes the motive of the paper.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In essence, the reason why the unity between man and nature becomes the core concept of traditional Chinese culture, is our splendid agricultural civilization. It is human dependence on the natural environment that makes the heaven the supreme god (Ding, 2020). As the classic proposition of traditional Chinese culture, the unity between man and nature, has always been the focus of the philosophers, and has constantly been contemplated and elucidated by scholars since it was proposed.

After Dong's likeness, Zhang Z. (1978), the great philosopher in the Northern Song Dynasty, systematically expounds the concept of the unity between man and nature. According to Zhang, the heaven (nature) merely possesses the attributes of generating all the things in the universe. Its divine power of governing the universe, actually, is the reflection of human desire. Zhang discards the theological elements in the concept, while emphasizing the natural and ethical significance of the heaven, by asserting that the heaven is eternally the source of all the things in the universe, which nothing can substitute till now.

Philosophers after Zhang Z., continue to explore the concept, of whom, Cheng H. in the Northern Song Dynasty, Zhu X. in the Southern Song Dynasty, Wang Y. in the Ming Dynasty, and Wang F. in the Qing Dynasty are the representatives (Zhang, 1985). From the perspective of these scholars, man loves and worships nature, by doing so, to achieve self-cultivation and mind elevation, and eventually the goal of the harmony between man and nature.

Theories pertinent to the relationship between man and nature, whether it is Confucianist, or Taoist, deem the harmony between man and nature is the ultimate goal, rather than putting the two in an adversarial relationship, which is the main stream of the western philosophy. In modern times, scholars still maintain the utmost interest in the studies of the unity, attempting to exploit the advantages of the theory while getting rid of those out-of-date elements, and have achieved remarkable success in many

aspects. According to the literature online (<https://www.cnki.net>), with “the unity between man and nature” as key words, more than 10,000 items can be found, among which, there are 8660 journal articles, 1988 academic dissertations, 325 conference papers, 67 newspaper articles and 12 books. Scholars and researchers attempt to apply the concept in different fields concerning philosophy, architecture, culture, environmental protection, education, Chinese medicine, history and even painting.

Zhang, D. (1985) points out that the majority of the great thinkers in ancient China worship the heaven, and utilize the law of the heaven to guide their behaviors. The unity between man and nature emphasized by Chinese philosophy also occupies a considerable significance in maintaining the ecological equilibrium. He holds the opinion that man should not only get adapted to nature, but also transform it, whereas the goal of human behaviors should be the reconstruction of the nature rather than the governing of it, making it better satisfy the needs of man, while not destroying the natural system to leave room for the development of all the things in it.

Qian (1991), a modern scholar of Confucianism, asserts that the concept of the unity between man and nature, is where the traditional Chinese culture belongs, and the greatest contribution that Chinese culture has made to humanity. The existence of man in the world is just the embodiment of the heaven. Without man, the will of the heaven can not be fulfilled. The unity between man and nature is also the belief of Chinese people. He criticizes the western practice of dis severing man from nature, concluding that it is just the western world view that eventually leads to the deterioration of the ecological environment, which consequently endangers human existence in the world.

Ji (1993), based on the analysis of several great philosophers in the history of Chinese philosophy, states clearly that the unity between man and nature is an important proposition in the history of Chinese philosophy, and also the full representation of the eastern thinking mode. This mode decides that our understanding of the world is holistic. He highly

evaluates Qian’s research and understanding of the unity between man and nature, by defining the heaven as nature, while man as human beings, and man, together with other animals, is an indispensable part of nature. Therefore, it is vital to appropriately tackle the relationship between man and nature. He appeals for the connection of our behaviors with our thinking mode, to better address the problems pertinent to the destruction of the micro-ecological environment, including acid rain, air pollution, ozonosphere hole, extinction of certain species, and the emergence of some new diseases.

As to the application of the concept in the field of education, most of the papers investigate its value as an important part of traditional Chinese culture. Some concern its role in the field of ideological and political education, with focus on the creation of the harmonious atmosphere in teaching. Nevertheless, only a few touch upon the specific application of the unity between man and nature in college English teaching.

Hong (2013) acknowledges that the traditional Chinese “human-nature” unity is of great significance in the process of mapping out strategies about how to optimize the classroom ecology after the analysis of all kinds of realistic predicaments. He expounds the important function the concept exercises in modern course design, and proposes the principles of wholeness, harmony and adaptation, which are considered to be the theoretical foundation of harmony teaching views, emphasizing their indispensable roles in the process of course design and the development of classroom activities.

Zhou & Qi (2023), instructed by the concept of unity, proposes a theoretical evaluation model covering nine dimensions of ideological and political education in college foreign language courses, concerning top-down design, teachers’ competence, construction of applicable platforms, integration of the teaching resources, enabling of the teaching environment, integration of social resources, affection of the teachers and students, implementation of teaching, and evaluation of teaching and learning outcomes. They establish an evaluation scale of

ideological and political education in college foreign language courses and throw out suggestions for foreign language teachers to apply the scale in language courses, highlighting the combination of various teaching resources concerning professional knowledge learning and moral cultivation.

The researches above discuss the application of the concept of the unity between man and nature as an integral part of traditional Chinese culture, concerning how to develop the teaching of traditional culture in foreign language education, whereas few explore the specific practice about how to design a college English course in the macro sense, or a teaching plan in the micro scale, which comprises the focus of this paper. It is deemed that attempts to put the concept into teaching practice, to be specific, into college English teaching, will produce notable effects.

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE AND NECESSITY OF THE RESEARCH

In *Guidelines on College English Teaching* (2020 version), college English is defined as one of the core general education courses. Knowledge proficiency and thought expression are acknowledged to be the objectives of foreign language learning. Moreover, political identification, the emotion of family-country, cultural literacy, expertise, and moral integrity, are all becoming the foci of foreign language courses. As one of the indicators of students' mastery of English, College English Test, a nation-wide test, has added paragraph translation from Chinese into English as an important parameter of the students' English proficiency since the December of 2013. In the first several years, the translation tasks are criticized for having no clear focus. Eventually, in the December of 2016, the paragraphs to be translated are mainly centering on one topic. The table of translation topics below illustrates clearly the foci of College English Test within the last 7 years from the December of 2016 to the December of 2022.

Table 1 Translation Tasks in CET since 2016

Year	Topic (June)		Topic (December)	
	General	Specific	General	Specific
2016			color	red, yellow, white
2017	river	the Yellow River, the Yangtze River, the Pearl River	mountain	Mount Tai, Mount Hua, Huangshan,
2018	travel	by air, by bus, by subway	mobile phone	mobile payment, smart phones, mobile phones
2019	folk arts	lion dancing, lantern, paper-cut	family, education, name	family concept, education investment, name of Han nationality
2020	food and drinks	hot pot, maotai, tea	food culture	south and north, reunification dinner, fish in Spring Festival
2021	tea	tieguanyin,	water engineering	Grand Canal,

		pu'er, longjing		Karez, Dujiangyan (dam)
2022	the quintessence of Chinese culture	opera, Taichi, lucky money	solar terms	Winter solstice, Start of Spring, Start of Autumn

The table above distinctly indicates that the test items revolve around the topics pertinent to Chinese culture and students' daily life, such as folk arts, songs and dance, customs, food and drinks, traditional sports, education, popular travel ways, rivers, and water conservancy facilities. Students are supposed to express all these things in English grammatically right, and idiomatically acceptable. To meet the new requirements of college English education, most of the publishing presses are endeavoring to compile the materials related to traditional Chinese culture into the textbooks designated by the teaching groups in the universities.

Nevertheless, with the efforts from different sides, there are still a lot of problems ailing the development of college English education. Course planning is not comprehensive enough to embrace all the situations emerging in the educational process. The textbooks are not full of variety to cover the required ideological elements, and the cultural materials are not systematically integrated into the teaching and learning process, since the majority of the teachers attach importance to the knowledge in their own field, not consciously embracing sufficient cultural elements in teaching activities. Besides, how to holistically evaluate the effects of all the practice, is still really a new topic most college English principals and teachers have to be confronted with.

Even though from every aspect, including course designers and selection of textbooks, efforts are made to cover cultural elements in English teaching and learning, they do not form one unity consistently, which goes against the purpose of course design. All these issues are hindering the construction of college English curriculum. The pace of tackling these problems decides the achievements of the course

reform. Hence, there is a great need to contemplate the issue systematically, and bring the initiatives of all quarters into play, to construct a unified course system with a full integration of cultural and ideological elements into professional knowledge teaching and learning to boost the all-round development of the students.

IV. COUNTERMEASURES TO BE TAKEN

The harmony and the global view contained in the unity between man and nature, contribute to the coordination of the relationships of different sides, and can provide guidance to the course design of college English, concerning the clarification of the teaching objectives, the selection of the teaching materials, the adoption of specific teaching procedures, the methods to be taken, and eventually the evaluation of the learning outcomes. Course design should conduce to promoting the attainment of students' language proficiency, the construction of the harmonious learning atmosphere to achieve the healthy development of students, the building of the good interpersonal relationship among students, and eventually a virtuous cycle of teaching and learning.

4.1 Top-level design

By top-level design, the course of college English, hereby is treated as a big project. To accomplish the goal of the project, the course designers, with a big-picture outlook, and unified teaching concept, from the top most, should take different aspects and factors involved into full account, endeavoring to find solutions to the problems occurring in college English teaching and learning. Here, one key point is that course design should be a unity of knowledge, thoughts and culture. All teaching activities should

center around the cultivation of the students' questioning spirit, critical thinking and autonomy in learning. When mapping out the syllabus, course designers, by utilizing professional knowledge and rich teaching experience, are supposed to integrate the cultural resources and professional materials by means of various tasks and exercises, aided by effective evaluation tools to achieve the unity of teaching, learning and evaluation in modern digitalized teaching environment.

By following the principle of the unity between man and nature, the objectives and requirements which involve knowledge, skills and proficiency, and humanistic quality, should be terse and concise, covering a wide range of subjects, concerning the positive attitudes towards life and society. The tasks and activities should be designed to promote the development of the students' physical and mental health, the interpersonal harmony, and also the harmony between man and society. Methods, such as task-based method, flipped classroom, communicative teaching and output-driven teaching, which significantly influence the outcomes of learning, should be pertinent to the students' language capacity, and easy to handle. As to evaluation, the combination of formative evaluation and summative evaluation is the trend. All the teaching behaviors should help foster students' confidence and pride in Chinese culture, and develop their persistence, honesty, integrity as well as bravery. The ultimate goal of education is to develop the students' world view, life view, value system, and feeling ascription to family, society and our country.

As for the total scores, it is often the case that students' learning performance is covering a large percentage, many reaching 50%, including the quiz and mid-term test scores, participation, and completion of assignments—both paper and paperless homework. The other part is students' final test scores, whose share is thus 50%. This is also the practice in our university. When it comes to the performance part, every semester, teachers, based on the requirements of teaching syllabus, would work out a new plan adapted to the students' learning

abilities. From specified teaching objectives and requirements, to textbooks, methods of teaching and learning and also ways of evaluation, all should be considered and implemented systematically and comprehensively to achieve the ultimate goal. The syllabus, the teaching plan, the calendar and assessment ways, will be elucidated to the students at the beginning of the school term. Students can check their performance recorded clearly and systematically in E-portfolios to ascertain whether their progress is in line with that of their classmates and also the requirements of the course.

4.2 Well-chosen teaching materials

As the major part of teaching activities, teaching materials, including textbooks and supplementary materials, should be the focus of course design. The target learners of the course are young people of about 18 years old. With not mature mental state, they are confronted with conflicts between ideal and reality, reason and emotion, and competition and stability, which are prone to mental problems. One aspect of the unity between man and nature, is the balance of the young people's physical and mental development. Therefore, the selected materials should cover those that can instruct students to achieve appropriate moral judgements, self-discipline and the knowledge-action unity. Moreover, this range of selection should also cover the materials of those concerning the disharmony between man and nature caused by human misbehaviors, including mental disorders, interpersonal conflicts, and destruction of living environments, such as soil erosion, desertification, and water shortage.

The proportion of the cultural and moral factors in materials, together with the collection of teaching cases, should fully be taken into consideration. The selected teaching cases should be typical and representative, to illustrate the point of culture and also can be easily integrated into language learning itself. Furthermore, all the materials should be conducive to the cultivation of the students' view of life, love, friendship, and the attitudes towards careers, to enhance the development of the students' optimistic and positive mental health. The table below

offers a brief view of the passages selected, and the expressions to be mastered, and exercises designed to reinforce students' understanding of the theme in a unit surrounding the topic – water problems in *New*

Progressive College English – Integrated Course, the textbooks of college English of Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology (BIPT).

Table 2 Passages and Expressions in the Unit – Water Problems

Passage	Topic	Chunks	Chunks related to the topic
Text	What's the world to do about water?	conserve water/resources, triggers geopolitical conflicts, sit at the top, address the problems, be confronted with, a tight budget, strategic importance, modern civilization, environmental protection, the dawn of a new energy era	renewable resources, energy consumption, environmental pollution, greenhouse effect, water and soil erosion, raise people's awareness, ecological balance, environmentally-friendly, preserve the environment, sustainable development
Reading 1	Global water scarcity	People do nothing in terms of preserving and using water wisely. The effects of water scarcity can be grouped into these 4 broad areas. Lack of water or quality water causes huge sanitation issues.	
Reading 2	China's water situation	a major concern, seriously contaminate groundwater supplies, work out a sustainable, long-term resolution, Rural residents lack access to drinking water.	
Exercises	Translation (English- Chinese)	Water is essential for almost every type of human activity. But in many parts of the world, water is becoming a problem, because it is running dry or because it is being polluted. Water, together with energy, food, environment and others, is listed as one of the top problems that human beings have to address in the next 50 years. There is no alternative for water. Without water, there could not be any other activities. Therefore, we need to conserve water to buy ourselves time so that scientists can find solutions to our problems.	
	Writing	Directions: For this part, you are allowed 30 minutes to write a speech on saving water resources. You should write at least 120 words but no more than 180 words and try to use the words you have learned in this unit.	

By learning the key expressions related to water problems, students can master their usages in specific contexts to express their opinions on and concern about the environment, and have a deeper understanding of the relations between man, society and nature from a new perspective, which is conducive to the development of harmony between man and nature, thus instructing them to devote their attention to the disharmonies between the three while achieving their own improvement. Therefore, the cultivation of harmony occurs naturally. Moreover, the students come to realize that the unity between man and nature is also an ecological view of sustainable development, which stresses that the development of humanity should abide by the law of nature.

4.3 Adoption of appropriate methods

With diverse materials, in the process of the construction of college English, effective teaching and learning methods should be taken into consideration as well to create the favorable atmosphere to achieve the students' all-round development. These methods should be consistent with the law of language learning. Teachers are supposed to take full advantage of the textbooks and the platforms provided by those smart teaching assisting means and websites, such as <https://www.mosoteach.cn>, and <http://www.mmhath.cn/download.html>, which are widely utilized in BIPT. The former can aid students' self-learning online before, in and after class. Teachers can monitor students' learning behaviors anytime and anywhere. The latter is a platform designed to scan the students' test papers, and provide online scoring of the papers. The students' study reports, including the data analysis which can reveal the trends of students' learning behaviors, can be generated quickly to instruct the teachers' subsequent work.

Moreover, most of the publishing groups, when compiling teaching materials, here mainly referring to the textbooks, develop the supporting platforms to assist learning and teaching. Take Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press as an example. The platform called *WeLearn* aims at facilitating the students who use *New Progressive College English* –

Integrated Course. In each unit, this platform provides a variety of choices for students and teachers, concerning theme exploration, language points, text analysis, supplementary readings, integrated skills practicing, cultivation of core value related to the topic of the unit, and self-test. Most of the learning platforms contain similar modules.

As to specific classroom activities, teachers should consciously integrate those cultural elements when enhancing the students' language competence. Take translation class as an example. Students treat national College English Test (CET) as an important indicator of their English proficiency. In translation part of CET, most of the test items are related to Chinese culture. In teaching practice, the task-based method is admitted to be a good choice. When it comes to Chinese folk arts such as lion dancing, lanterns, paper cut and kites, students are required to individually search and prepare at least 10 words and phrases related to each topic before class. Then in class, they, in pairs or groups, summarize the typical expressions and collocations by means of negotiating, explaining, or inquiring, to ascertain the appropriate usages of the expressions, such as *embody*, *represent*, *stand for*, *symbolize*, *date back to*, *typical*, and *classic*, while making a deep understanding of the subtle distinction between those with similar meanings, such as *signal*, *delegate*, *on behalf of* and *replace* in specific contexts. Revolving the topic, students might also be required to accomplish tasks such as presentation and speech in class as group work to practice their oral English as well as their understanding of our traditional culture in modern environments. Outside the classroom, lectures and contests related to traditional culture are organized to create the atmosphere of language and culture learning and also to develop students' communicative competence.

4.4 Improvement of the evaluation system

After defining teaching objectives, selection of teaching materials, and adoption of appropriate teaching methods, we come to the last step, evaluation of outcomes of all the teaching and learning behaviors. Evaluation can check learning effects, indicate the direction and foci of all the teaching activities, guide

the way of college English teaching and reform, and guarantee the harmonious development of the course reform. As syllabus designers, most of the time, we teachers, should carefully contemplate the advantages of each method, for the purpose of building a unified dynamic evaluation system containing all the major educational parameters.

In the process of evaluation, the harmony between the process and outcomes, and holistic evaluation and individual evaluation, should both be taken into consideration. Therefore, our evaluation of the course is the comprehensive rating of the students' performance in language learning, a combination of

formative and summative assessment, aiming to promote the students' language proficiency, not merely the diagnosis of their learning problems. In the formative assessment, e-portfolios are established to record the students' performance in learning process concerning their participation, autonomy, completion of assignments, and quiz scores, indicating the relation between their efforts and final achievements. Students' performance might cover as high as 50% of the total score, while the other 50% is the score in the final exam. The following is a simplified sample of students' Performance Report of College English of BIPT to briefly illustrate how the total score is composed of.

Table 3 A Simplified Sample of the Students' Performance Report (BIPT)

No.	Major	School ID	Name	Quizzes (1&2) 20%	Assignments 10%	Self study 10%	Participation 10%	Total 50%
1	Chemistry	221111	Alice	17.8	9.3	9.2	8.2	44.5
2	Chemistry	221112	Tim	18	9.0	9.3	7.7	44
3	Chemistry	221113	James	19.8	9.4	10.0	9.3	48.5
4	Materials	222111	Alex	15.6	5.0	8.3	7.0	35.9
5	Materials	222112	Diana	17	7.1	9.2	8.5	41.8

The combination of the formative and the summative assessment is found to be an effective method to foster students' learning autonomy and linguistic and humanistic competence. The assessment combines teaching objectives, teaching and learning process and evaluation methods, with the focus on the formative assessment. When it comes to the analysis of the achievement degree of the teaching objectives, all the main aspects of students'

competence are covered, including vocabulary, listening and speaking, reading, writing and translation in language itself and also humanistic literacy in general. The following is the simplified assessment section of the Goals of Reading and Humanistic accomplishment in the syllabus of English Reading, Writing and Translation, an English course of BIPT.

Table 4 Criteria of assessment (English Reading, Writing and Translation)

Goals	Assessment methods	Explanation of the assignments and tests
Reading Goal Understanding of the reading materials including journal articles and science passages at the speed of 60-70 words per minute, and mapping out their	performance	online preview, in-class quizzes, discussions, group work
	autonomy	group work, or self-assessment and self-learning on online platforms

main ideas and the detailed information aided by dictionaries; scanning and skimming the comparatively long passages at a speed of 100-110 words per minute.	quizzes	vocabularies in required reading materials and reading comprehension of the passages
Goal of Humanistic Accomplishment International vision, patriotism, cross-culture communicative competence, critical thinking, team spirit, and life-long learning ability.	final test	Vocabulary, Reading Comprehension, Writing & Translation

From the table above, it is evident that evaluation, with proposed assessment methods, runs the gamut of the main indicators of the whole learning process. The course achievements of students in BIPT within the last few years prove the feasibility of the evaluation mechanisms of such a combination. The fluctuation of the achievement degree is an embodiment of the students' language learning outcomes, which, in turn, can act as teachers' reference in their future teaching.

V. CONCLUSION

The unity between man and nature, is the relationship between man and our living environments, and also the recapitulation of the Chinese understanding of the universe. In this unity, human behaviors should be in accordance with the law of nature, to achieve the harmony and coexistence between the two. This understanding, in reality, requires people to treat things holistically. It functions as the guideline in many fields concerning philosophy, culture, architecture, environmental protection, traditional Chinese medicine, and education. College English of BIPT, as an integral part of higher education in China, attempts to gain insights from this understanding of unity, and our efforts produce significant results. In the field of English teaching, the unity between man and nature, is the unity of all the aspects of English teaching and learning, and also that between language learning and cultural education.

After years' teaching practice, the unity between language learning and cultural acquisition greatly improves the achievements of students' foreign

language learning. It facilitates the process of course design, promoting students to understand the essence of traditional Chinese culture in the process of language learning, and cultivating their confidence in Chinese culture. It is conducive to activating the students' learning initiatives, making up for the shortcomings of traditional education and providing a certain reference for the integration of English learning into cultural education. Nevertheless, the evaluation system sometimes appears to be time-consuming, requiring teachers to endeavor great energy to accomplish, which needs to be further improved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The paper is partial accomplishment of the research work – University Research Project of Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology (BIPT). The project number is 2023J00090.

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