HiLL PUBLISHING

The Educational Review, USA, 2025, 9(10), 878-883
https://www.hillpublisher.com/Journals/er/
ISSN Online: 2575-7946
ISSN Print: 2575-7938

An Exploration on Secondary-School English Learning Within a University-School Cooperative Community: An Interdisciplinary Drama Project Based on Classical Chinese Prose

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How to cite this paper: Yafei Wang, Yutong Hu. (2025). An Exploration on Secondary-School English Learning Within a University-School Cooperative Community: An Interdisciplinary Drama Project Based on Classical Chinese Prose. *The Educational Review, USA*, 9(10), 878-883.
DOI: 10.26855/er.2025.10.009

Received: September 27, 2025
Accepted: October 25, 2025
Published: November 24, 2025

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Abstract

To address the persistent problems of insufficient cultural immersion, monotonous practice scenarios, and weak cross-stage resource coordination in secondary-school English education, this study established a "university-school cooperative community" and launched an interdisciplinary English-drama programme anchored in two classical Chinese texts prescribed for junior-high students. The project targets three mutually reinforcing domains: linguistic proficiency, cultural literacy, and transferable competencies. Through a "dual-tutor" system, layered collaboration, and shared outputs, the project achieved a deep fusion of classical-text interpretation, English-language practice, and artistic expression. The findings demonstrate that this method significantly enhances students' English proficiency, and the productive data show marked improvement in oral fluency. It enhances the awareness of intercultural communication and overall literacy; students shifted from passive reception of classical texts to active dissemination. It offers a replicable and scalable model for innovating secondary-school English instruction and providing new insights into how university and school resources can be synergised to empower English learning.

Keywords

University-school cooperative community; English learning; English drama; Interdisciplinary practice; Collaborative education

1. Introduction

Secondary-school English teaching in China remains constrained by three interrelated limitations. First, language learning disengages from cultural transmission: students devote excessive attention to memorising vocabulary and grammar, but are rarely required to express or disseminate traditional Chinese culture in English. Second, practice scenarios are monotonous: teacher-centred classrooms provide few opportunities for authentic language use or creative expression. Third, educational resources are poorly coordinated: secondary schools lack the specialist staff and facilities needed for high-order language activities, whereas universities possess abundant expertise in language pedagogy and intercultural research that seldom reaches the basic-education sector. Educational drama—an activity that integrates language use, cultural representation, and artistic practice—can offer an immersive setting for language development; a "university-school cooperative community" can align higher-education intellectual resources

with secondary-school practice sites, thereby creating space for pedagogical innovation. Grounded in this rationale, the present study explores a new university-empowered method for English learning by adapting and performing ancient Chinese stories in English drama.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Collaborative-governance theory

At the heart of collaborative-governance theory lies the idea that multiple stakeholders can pool resources and optimise goals through coordinated action (Ostrom, 2009). Within a university–school cooperative community, universities and secondary schools integrate faculty, knowledge, and practical resources around a shared objective of innovating English instruction, thereby generating synergistic effects that raise teaching quality (Zhang & Zhu, 2015). School-university partnerships require both parties to assume shared educational responsibility (Druger, 1989). Scholars generally agree that university–school collaboration can help alleviate the teacher and facility shortages of basic education (Gu, 2022). Existing studies, however, have concentrated on curriculum development or in-service teacher training; empirical investigations into cross-stage collaborative practice in English teaching remain scarce, especially projects that place cultural transmission at their core.

2.2 Situated-cognition theory

Situated-cognition theory contends that learning must occur in authentic or simulated contexts where knowledge is interactively constructed (Lave, 1991). Educational drama provides such a context: through role enactment and line delivery, students naturally enhance oral proficiency while deepening their understanding of traditional culture. Previous research has confirmed that drama improves students' speaking, critical thinking, and teamwork skills (Wang, 2021), yet most projects were confined to a single school or stage, lacked cross-stage resource support, and paid insufficient attention to the creative integration of traditional Chinese culture. Consequently, the pedagogical goal of "telling Chinese stories well in English" has rarely been achieved.

2.3 Cultural-transmission theory

Cultural-transmission theory posits that communication involves encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages (Lasswell, 1948). In the present project, students encoded the traditional values embedded in ancient Chinese narratives into dramatic English, transmitted cultural meanings through performance, and thereby improved both cultural understanding and intercultural communicative competence. Although researchers have explored ways to insert traditional culture into English lessons (Zhang, 2022), these attempts usually stopped at vocabulary explanation or reading comprehension; creative, performative cultural-expression activities were absent, so students seldom developed a systematic ability to communicate traditional culture in English.

Taken together, the extant literature has not yet formed an integrated research chain linking "university–school collaboration, drama-based practice and traditional-culture transmission". The present study addresses this gap by constructing a cooperative community and implementing an English-drama project based on Chinese stories, thereby examining the effectiveness of the proposed pedagogical model.

3. The Practice of the Interdisciplinary Project

3.1 Core objectives

The project targets three mutually reinforcing domains: linguistic proficiency, cultural literacy, and transferable competencies.

The linguistic goal is to enhance oral fluency, phonological accuracy, and creative writing so that learners can articulate the cultural meanings embedded in classical Chinese prose and build a systematic repertoire of culture-specific lexis and syntactic patterns. The cultural goal is to deepen understanding of the essence of traditional Chinese culture encoded in the texts (e.g., diligence in study, self-reflection, rhetorical wisdom) and foster the disposition and ability to disseminate these values in English.

The competency goal is to develop critical thinking (character and plot analysis), teamwork (group rehearsal and prop fabrication), and creativity (script adaptation and stage design) through dramatic praxis.

3.2 Architecture of the university–school cooperative community

Collaboration is operationalised via three interlocking mechanisms—dual-tutor guidance, layered coordination, and shared outputs—which respectively secure human capital, delineate authority lines, and ensure sustainable resource accumulation, thereby forming a closed loop of "expert leadership—practice enactment—iterative refinement".

3.2.1 Dual-tutor team

A "secondary-school English teacher+university peer-tutor" pair combines pedagogical experience at the basic-education level with higher-education subject expertise. School teachers define linguistic targets, diagnose learner needs, and align tasks with curricular standards; university postgraduates and undergraduates provide specialist support—postgraduates lead script adaptation to guarantee linguistic accuracy and cultural fidelity, while undergraduates deliver coaching on pronunciation and rehearsal, simultaneously functioning as approachable role-models to heighten student engagement.

3.2.2 Layered coordination and task articulation

A four-tier system—"university supervisor—university peer-tutors—school teachers—secondary-school students"—distributes responsibilities vertically. The university supervisor drafts the project blueprint and evaluation rubrics, steering both language teaching and cultural transmission. A postgraduate "core script-adaptation group" applies insights from linguistics and translation studies to convert classical prose into performable, idiomatic English and supplies cultural annotations. Undergraduates are assigned to individual student-actor groups for one-to-one or one-to-many rehearsal coaching (pronunciation, gesture, character psychology), while school teachers synchronise project pacing, relay learning difficulties, and ensure concord with the school's instructional calendar.

3.2.3 Outcome-sharing and iterative-refinement mechanism

All deliverables—parallel bilingual scripts (classical Chinese source text+ performable English version), teaching guides (detailing rehearsal flow and language-coaching points), and professionally edited performance videos—are deposited in a "University–Secondary-School English Teaching Resource Bank." These artefacts are freely available for subsequent English lessons and extracurricular programmes in both partner institutions and can be disseminated to other schools through regional teacher-learning networks.

University peer-tutors transform their field experience into coursework papers, conference presentations or research case studies, thereby advancing their own pedagogical and academic development while contributing empirical evidence to university-based foreign-language-education reform. In turn, secondary-school teachers use impact data—gains in oral proficiency, cultural awareness, and learner motivation—to refine everyday English-teaching schemes, incorporating drama-based interactional strategies and situated task design into regular classes.

This closed feedback loop converts university scholarly resources into drivers of school-level innovation and channels authentic classroom insights back into teacher-education and research agendas, achieving mutually empowering development for both sectors.

3.3 Implementation Process

3.3.1 Preparation phase: laying the cultural and linguistic groundwork

Secondary-school English teachers, situated at the frontline of junior-high instruction, possess intimate knowledge of their students' lexical repertoire, grammatical competence, and the predominantly concrete, activity-oriented cognitive style characteristic of early adolescents. Anchored in the competency descriptors of the *Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)*, these teachers decompose the complex rehearsal process into a graded sequence—"chorus reading—segmented practice—full performance"—that deliberately avoids linguistic demands beyond the learners' current level, thereby ensuring that the dramatic tasks are simultaneously engaging and manageable.

The university peer-tutor cohort—comprising postgraduate and undergraduate English majors—provides complementary academic and practical support. Drawing on their expertise in linguistics and translation studies, postgraduate tutors assume responsibility for the linguistic accuracy and cultural integrity of the script adaptation. Their role extends beyond faithful semantic transfer from classical Chinese to age-appropriate English: they conduct philological investigations of key cultural images (e.g., the historical pragmatics of "讽谏" "indirect admonition" and

"纳谏" "acceptance of counsel"), gloss culturally loaded items, and refine diction so that the dialogue remains idiomatic yet accessible to junior-high learners. Undergraduates, whose age proximity minimizes social distance, function as rehearsal coaches and affective mediators. They deliver line-by-line pronunciation feedback, model intonation and rhythm, simulate conversational scenarios to foster oral fluency, and share personal language-learning narratives that boost students' self-efficacy. This dual-layer mentorship effectively alleviates performance anxiety and heightens learners' voluntary engagement in the dramatic enterprise.

3.3.2 Rehearsal phase: integrating language practice with cultural expression

To prevent role overlap and procedural disjunction, we instituted a four-tier collaboration architecture—"university supervisor—university peer-tutors—secondary-school teacher—secondary-school student"—that assigns each agent a distinct stratum of responsibility and guarantees precise task articulation.

University supervisors function as the project's top-level designers. Drawing on their expertise in foreign-language pedagogy and intercultural research, they formulate the overarching blueprint that articulates the dual objectives of "language enhancement+cultural transmission," and devise assessment rubrics covering linguistic accuracy, characterisation, ensemble coordination, and other key dimensions, thereby providing both direction and quality benchmarks for the entire rehearsal cycle.

Postgraduate tutors form a dedicated "core script-adaptation unit." Immersing themselves in the classical source text, they distil pivotal plotlines, character relations, and cultural essences, and—guided by contemporary translation theory—render these elements into idiomatic, performance-ready English. Mindful of junior-high learners' proficiency ceilings, they avoid overly literary diction while preserving the source's cultural flavour, and append extensive annotations on historical context, ritual etiquette, and salient imagery, thereby laying a rigorous academic foundation for subsequent rehearsals. Chinese classical etiquette (e.g., gong-shou and yi-li hand-salutes) is woven into rehearsals, and simple period-props—bamboo slips, imitation silk robes—are fabricated to heighten cultural immediacy. Prompts such as "How does Zou Ji persuade the king politely?" require students to analyse cultural subtext in English, fusing linguistic processing with intercultural reflection.

Undergraduate tutors adopt an "embedded group-coaching" model, aligning their individual specialisations with the specific needs of each student-actor cohort. During line-work, they correct word-stress, chunking, and intonation; during acting sessions, they guide learners to map character psychology onto posture, facial expression, and stage movement, and to block scenes so that textual meaning is rendered physically and spatially. They also mediate intra-group dynamics, assisting team leaders in task allocation and ensuring that rehearsals proceed efficiently.

Secondary-school teachers act as the "collaborative hub." They synchronise the timetables of university tutors and secondary-school students, draft detailed rehearsal schedules that do not conflict with regular curricular pacing, and continuously monitor learner progress. By collecting and relaying students' real-time difficulties—whether linguistic or interpretive—they enable dynamic adjustment of coaching strategies. When necessary, they interject concise explanations of classical Chinese lexis or historical background, ensuring that academic input is seamlessly calibrated to adolescent cognitive levels.

3.3.3 Performance & reflection phase: public presentation and iterative sharing

The dramatic products are rendered in a professionally shot video: junior-high students perform in full costume and without scripts, replicating authentic theatre protocols, while the university team handles filming, editing, and captioning to guarantee the accurate display of English lines. A bilingual debriefing seminar follows the screening; using selected excerpts, teachers and students jointly interrogate issues such as "Do the characters' linguistic choices match their personalities?" and "Has cultural meaning been faithfully transmitted?" Students share their experiences in English, and assessment is diversified: secondary-school pupils submit English reflection journals (documenting language gains and cultural insights), and university peer-tutors file practice reports (summarising coaching strategies and analysing learner progress), thereby closing a complete learning-and-reflection loop.

To sustain the collaborative enterprise, a resource-sharing and iteration mechanism is instituted. All artefacts are systematically curated upon project completion: parallel bilingual scripts (classical Chinese original and dramaturgical English version), a teaching guide (detailing rehearsal flow, linguistic coaching points, and troubleshooting solutions), and a high-quality performance video (full show, highlights, and behind-the-scenes footage). These materials are deposited in a "University–School English Teaching Resource Bank" for repeated use in future lessons and extracurricular programmes, and are disseminated through professional teaching networks to benefit a wider

constituency.

A feedback-and-optimisation closed loop is simultaneously established. University peer-tutors distil coaching experiences, emergent problems and solutions into course essays, research cases or graduation theses, thereby enhancing their own pedagogical expertise and supplying authentic evidence for foreign-language-education reform. Secondary-school teachers, drawing on empirical outcomes, analyse gains in learners' linguistic competence and cultural cognition, and feed drama-derived interactional strategies and scenario-design techniques back into regular instruction, continuously refining English-teaching schemes. Through this reciprocal mechanism, university scholarly resources are converted into drivers of school-level practice, while school-based empirical evidence informs university teacher-education and research agendas, realising mutually empowering development for both sectors.

4. Effects of the Interdisciplinary Project

4.1 Significant gains in productive English proficiency

Productive data show marked improvement in oral fluency: 82% of participants reported in their reflective journals that they could now "express complex cultural ideas in English more confidently". In rehearsal, they spontaneously used culture-laden lexical items such as "persevere in learning" and "self-reflection". During script adaptation, they authored contextually appropriate dialogue (e.g., a modern character advises, "We should learn from Zou Ji's wisdom of listening to others' opinions"), demonstrating creative writing ability. Pre-/post-project comparisons revealed an average 1.2-level gain on a 5-level oral-fluency scale and a rise from 45% to 88% accuracy on culture-specific English expression items.

4.2 Heightened awareness and capacity for cultural transmission

Students shifted from passive reception of classical texts to active dissemination. 79% stated that through drama they "truly understood the communicative wisdom in Zou Ji" and wished "to introduce the story to more people in English". During the public showcase, they voluntarily explained cultural subtext to parents and peers (sample utterance: "The king's willingness to accept advice is an important part of traditional Chinese political wisdom"). Several uploaded the bilingual script to international learning platforms and initiated exchanges with overseas netusers, evidencing strong agency in intercultural communication.

4.3 Holistic development of twenty-first-century competencies

Students demonstrated significant gains in critical thinking, collaborative, and creative competencies.

The critical thinking competency has been improved. Students analysed character motivation (e.g., Why did Zou Ji use an analogy of beauty instead of direct remonstrance?) and evaluated textual logic.

The collaborative skill has been enhanced. Clear division of labour in prop-making and scene rehearsal; participants tutored peers with weaker English, with 91% agreeing that "teamwork not only improved my English but also taught me to listen and be inclusive".

The creative capacity has been increased. Students generated dramaturgical innovations such as a dual timeline narrative and cross-stage dialogues between ancient and modern personas, enriching the production and demonstrating original thinking.

5. Conclusion

Grounded in a university–school cooperative community, the present study has forged a new English-learning method that fuses classical Chinese prose with educational drama. Through carefully designed collaborative structures and iterative practice cycles, the project achieved an integrated nexus of language acquisition, traditional-culture transmission, and cross-stage resource synergy. Empirical evidence indicates significant improvements in students' English proficiency, cultural-propagation competence, and overall literacy. The model offers a feasible template for secondary-school English innovation and provides fresh impetus for university–school collaboration. Future work should deepen bilateral synergy, refine micro-level implementation details, and scale the method to additional educational regions, thereby cultivating English learners who possess both strong linguistic command and robust cultural literacy.

Funding

This work was supported by the Project Fund of the Teaching Reform of North China University of Technology (Project code: 10805136025XN072-118).

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