Research on the Collaborative Language Application Ability of Learning Task Cluster from the Perspective of Cultural Tool Theory

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Abstract: *The current implementation of Chinese language learning task cluster faces integration challenges, with the root cause being cultural disconnection that weakens linguistic competence foundations and systemic barriers hindering dynamic symbol circulation, leading to risks of linguistic competence dilution. Although competency-oriented curriculum standards have gained widespread recognition, achieving a comprehensive leap from singular language skills to integrated literacy and from instrumental rationality to value-based rationality remains unbroken through. This study employs cultural instrument theory as a breakthrough mechanism, critically revealing how "de-culturalization" training and "inter-group isolation" obscure the essence of language-cultural mediation. Building on Vygotsky's mediating theory and Engestrom's activity theory, it reconstructs the three-dimensional attributes of language "instrument-culture-practice" and the collaborative core of task clusters characterized by "contradictory drive and hierarchical progression." The core insight lies in elucidating their linkage mechanism through tool circulation and meaning proliferation, driving holistic advancement of linguistic competence across cognitive proficiency, cultural negotiation capabilities, and symbolic mastery. Ultimately transcending the trap of instrumental rationality, this study advocates constructing a dialectical paradigm of "instrument-subject-culture", guiding students to transition from skill users to cultural producers and identity awakeners, thereby providing practical pathways for implementing core competencies.*

Keywords: Learning task cluster, Language application ability, Cultural tool theory, Activity theory.

1. Introduction

The new curriculum standards advocate for holistic enhancement of literacy competencies, yet task-based learning initiatives face integration challenges (Editorial Department of Chinese Language Construction, 2019). The cultural context's detachment weakens the foundation of capabilities, while systemic barriers hinder the dynamic circulation of symbolic knowledge. Cultural instrument theory emerges as a breakthrough solution, revealing language as a living mediator rooted in cultural practice. Collaborative task-based learning represents an ecological process where tools evolve and meanings are reconstructed through contradictory forces. This paper explores these mechanisms by deconstructing their underlying operational principles.

2. The Cultural Instrumental Turn in Language Ability Development

The current Chinese language curriculum reform is undergoing a paradigm shift from "knowledge transmission" to "competency development". This transformation manifests in two key aspects: the teaching of language knowledge is no longer confined to mechanical delivery but places greater emphasis on cultivating students' intrinsic competencies as active learners. Simultaneously, it demonstrates that contemporary educational practices are moving beyond instrumental rationality focused on knowledge acquisition to prioritize value-based rationality in nurturing learning subjects. While teachers widely employ learning task clusters for knowledge instruction and integration during the new curriculum reform, their practical implementation remains deeply entrenched in the constraints of instrumental rationality.

2.1 The Crisis of Linguistic Ability Virtualization Caused by the Integration of Task Clusters

The concept of Learning Task Clusters was originally designed to help teachers systematically integrate Chinese language learning knowledge through contextualized scenarios, enabling students to effectively enhance their literacy in diverse environments. However, in current educational practices, the integration of these clusters has not progressed as smoothly as anticipated. While many sound educational philosophies encounter various obstacles during implementation, similar challenges persist in the execution of Learning Task Clusters.

2.1.1 Skills training divorced from cultural context

In current task-based learning practices, language skill training often falls into the trap of "de-culturalization". Some teachers break down task clusters into isolated modules for listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the "Practical Reading and Communication" module, they focus solely on format standards and information extraction techniques while neglecting cross-cultural communication etiquette in business correspondence. The "Literary Reading and Creative Expression" module overanalyzes rhetorical structures at the expense of historical context. This approach reduces language to a mere formal tool—students may excel in standardized tests but struggle to apply skills flexibly in real cultural contexts. This precisely exposes the risks of "single-polar orientation" (Xiaowei Yang, Quanli Zhang, 2016): language competence gets oversimplified into quantifiable skill metrics, obscuring its essence as a cultural mediator. Vygotsky emphasized that language's psychological tool function is always embedded in specific cultural contexts. Context-free training creates "language robots" —a departure from the original intent of task-based learning to cultivate "competency

development".

2.1.2 Barriers to the flow of tools between task clusters

The collaborative nature of task clusters in educational practice is frequently undermined, resulting in "intercluster isolation". The "Critical Thinking Reading and Expression" cluster emphasizes rigorous logical reasoning, while the "Literary Reading and Creative Expression" cluster focuses on emotional expression. Though these two domains should complement each other, teachers often categorize them as separate camps of "rationality" and "emotionalism". Students' metaphorical expressions developed through literary tasks struggle to transfer to critical writing, just as their precision in practical text articulation fails to provide guidelines for literary creation. This divide stems from a mechanical understanding of "collaboration" —viewing task clusters as isolated parallel systems rather than dynamic interactive ecosystems. Activity theory reveals that blocked tool circulation between systems leads to stagnation. When task clusters lack cross-cluster symbolic resource flow, language development becomes trapped in a dilemma of "partial reinforcement at the expense of holistic abstraction".

2.2 The Methodological Reconstruction of Chinese Language and Literature Education based on Cultural Tools

2.2.1 Vikovsky said that language is a dual tool of psychology and culture

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory provides a classic interpretation of the dual nature of language as both a tool and a tool. In his "mediation theory", he argues that language serves as both a "psychological instrument" for individual cognitive processing and a "symbolic carrier" for social-cultural transmission. As a psychological instrument, language helps learners abstract sensory experiences into concepts through literary devices like "symbols" and "metaphors" that foster abstract thinking. As a cultural instrument, it carries the value systems and practical norms of specific clusters—such as how the honorific system in ancient letters reflects the ethical order of patriarchal societies. This theory revolutionizes Chinese language and literature education by breaking the one-dimensional view of "language = skill". It requires task-based instruction to not only train students' operational skills with linguistic symbols but also guide them to understand the cultural logic behind these symbols, advocating for holistic development rather than fragmented skill training. The goal of Chinese language and literature education should be the coordinated development of psychological and cultural tools, not isolated skill acquisition.

2.2.2 Engestrom's activity theory: the philosophical basis of task cluster collaboration

Engestrom's activity system theory provides profound philosophical underpinning for task cluster collaboration. This framework views human activities as dynamic systems composed of "subject, tool, and object", where internal and inter-system contradictions serve as the fundamental driving force for development (Hasu M, Engestrom Y, 2000). In Chinese language and literature education, each learning task cluster functions as an independent activity system: "Practical Reading and Communication" targets "solving real-world problems", while "Literary Reading and Creative Expression" focuses on "aesthetic experience" —their differing objectives creating inherent conflicts. However, the activity theory emphasizes that contradictions are not opposition but opportunities for synergy—— Through cross-group tool exchanges and rule negotiations, these conflicts can transform into forces for "unity in opposition". This perspective transcends superficial understandings of collaboration, revealing its essence: through continuous resolution of "tool adaptability" and "goal compatibility" contradictions, language proficiency evolves from "single skill" to "comprehensive literacy".

3. The Relationship between Cultural Tools and Task Cluster Collaboration

The preceding discussion outlines the cultural instrument theory paradigm shift in language proficiency development, examines the crisis of linguistic competence dilution caused by task cluster fragmentation, and reconstructs methodological frameworks for Chinese language and literature education through cultural instrument perspectives. These findings establish a foundation for further exploring the synergistic relationship between cultural instruments and task clusters. Addressing practical challenges in task cluster implementation, we recognize the necessity of integrating cultural instrument theory. Subsequently, this analysis delves into the essential nature of cultural instruments and the theoretical core of task cluster collaboration, ultimately identifying their pivotal connection to gain deeper understanding of their roles in language development.

3.1 Reexamination of the Nature of Language as a Cultural Tool

3.1.1 Instrumentality: the intermediary carrier of cognitive processing

The instrumental core of language lies in its mediating role in cognitive processes. From Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" theory, linguistic symbols serve as bridges connecting "current competence" with "potential development" (Mind and Language, 2010). When analyzing complex texts, students rely on concepts like "arguments", "evidence" and "logical chains" to organize their thoughts. In creative writing, they depend on literary terms such as "imagery" and "perspective" to construct expressive frameworks. This mediating function is practical: learners transform vague intuition into clear thinking through linguistic symbols, then externalize it into communicable expressions. Notably, the cognitive mediating role of language is not a passive "knowledge conveyor", but an active "processing engine". Language filters, reorganizes, and creatively processes information during cognition, ultimately forming individualized intellectual outputs. If task-based cluster teaching ignores this characteristic by reducing language to a mere "knowledge container", it would undermine its core value in promoting cognitive development.

3.1.2 Culture: the construction symbol of the world of meaning

The cultural nature of language manifests as symbolic constructs of meaning systems rather than neutral formal frameworks (Yingju Zhao, 2006). Each linguistic symbol carries specific cultural codes: "bright moon" in Chinese not only denotes celestial phenomena but also embodies cultural connotations like "nostalgia" and "eternity"; while "individualism" in English reflects Western value orientations. This cultural dimension dictates that linguistic competence involves not merely correct symbol usage, but also the ability to decode cultural meanings. Collaborative learning tasks must align with this essence. For instance, in the "Ancient Poetry Reading and Appreciation" task cluster, students decode ancient cosmological perspectives through symbolic devices like "bi-xing" (metaphorical allusions) and "yongdian" (allusion references). Transferring this decoding skill to the "Contemporary Cultural Participation" task cluster allows deeper understanding of youth subcultures behind internet buzzwords. Thus, linguistic symbols' meanings are not static but continuously reconstructed through cross-cultural and cross-temporal exchanges. The collaborative value of task clusters lies in providing diverse scenarios for such semantic reconstruction.

3.1.3 Practice: a certificate of participation in social activities

The practical nature of language serves as a "social credential" for participation, with its value realized through application. As Vygotsky posits, language originates as a communication tool, where individual linguistic development is inherently embedded in social interactions (Mind and Language, 2010). The debate protocols acquired through the "Critical Thinking Reading and Expression" task cluster essentially act as entry tickets to public discourse, while the application writing standards mastered in "Practical Reading and Communication" serve as access codes for accessing social services. This practical orientation guides task clusters to transcend classroom simulations, extending into authentic socio-cultural practices. Language proficiency evaluation should not only measure test accuracy but also assess real-world problem-solving effectiveness in family, community, and workplace contexts. Only by breaking classroom boundaries and allowing students to refine language skills through authentic interactions can we achieve the crucial leap from "knowing" to "using."

3.2 The Theoretical Core of Learning Task Cluster Collaboration

3.2.1 The dialectics of coordination: dynamic balance driven by contradiction

The collaboration in learning task clusters is not about eliminating differences through homogenization, but rather maintaining dynamic equilibrium driven by contradictions (Peng Xu, 2018). This dialectical nature manifests in inherent differences among various task clusters: "Literary Reading and Creative Expression" emphasizes emotional uniqueness, while "Practical Reading and Communication" prioritizes standardized expression; "Critical Thinking Reading and Expression" focuses on logical rigor, whereas "Contemporary Cultural Engagement" values interactive flexibility. These differences create the "contradictory tension" of collaboration—overemphasizing literary freedom risks

causing scattered thinking, while excessively pursuing practical norms may stifle creativity. Activity theory reveals that healthy collaboration is a process where opposing sides coexist and transform into each other. The imagination cultivated through literary task clusters can inject fresh perspectives into critical writing, while precision in practical writing training can enhance the power of literary expression. This balance isn't static "half-and-half" but dynamic "adaptation to circumstances". The dialectical nature of collaboration requires teachers to flexibly adjust task cluster interactions based on student needs, seeking complementarity within differences.

3.2.2 Case study: the opposition and unity of literary lyricism and practical rigor

The dynamic interplay between "literary lyricism" and "practical rigor" vividly illustrates the dialectical relationship in task cluster collaboration. Within the "Literary Reading and Creative Expression" task cluster, students develop lyrical techniques like synesthesia and hyperbole, as exemplified by the metaphor "moonlight flowing into a silver river". Conversely, the "Practical Reading and Communication" task cluster emphasizes data precision and logical clarity, as seen in the experimental report's statement: "A 10°C temperature increase results in a 20% reaction rate enhancement". Though seemingly contradictory, these elements achieve synergy through collaborative integration. In the cross-task "Science Communication Writing", literary lyricism transforms rigorous scientific knowledge into accessible language, while practical rigor anchors literary expression in factual grounding. This synergy transcends simple addition—it represents creative fusion. Students ultimately cultivate linguistic competence that balances both qualities: neither purely literary romanticism nor rigid technical specifications, but a comprehensive literacy adept at flexibly adapting these traits to contextual needs.

3.2.3 The collaborative hierarchy progresses from tool exchange to rule negotiation and then to goal symbiosis

The collaborative development of learning task clusters progresses through three progressive stages: from tool exchange to rule negotiation and ultimately to goal co-creation. The initial stage involves direct resource sharing across clusters, such as applying metaphorical rhetoric learned in "literary reading" to enhance product descriptions in "practical writing". The intermediate stage requires learners to establish conversion mechanisms between discourse systems, like adhering to the "thesis – argument - conclusion" logic in "critical reading" while encouraging free expression through "stream-of-consciousness" in "literary creation", where boundaries between strict adherence and creative flexibility must be negotiated. The advanced stage achieves goal co-creation, transforming isolated objectives into an integrated "competency ecosystem". For example, cultural heritage awareness cultivated in "ancient poetry reading" and critical thinking developed in "contemporary cultural engagement" jointly serve the core mission of fostering cultural identity and innovation. This progression demonstrates how task cluster collaboration evolves from basic resource sharing to deep integration at the goal level, ultimately achieving systematic language development.

3.3 The Connection Hub between Cultural Tools and Task Cluster Collaboration

3.3.1 Tool circulation: the migration and translation of cross-group language symbols

Instrumental circulation serves as the foundational link between cultural tools and task clusters, manifested through the migration and translation of linguistic symbols across clusters. The migration refers to the direct reuse of symbolic forms, such as the concept of "expository sequence" being transferred from "practical reading" to "literary creation", which helps students clearly structure narratives. Translation involves creative recontextualization of symbolic meanings, like adapting "metaphor" from literary contexts to philosophical ones, endowing it with new logical functions. This circulation breaks down the closed nature of task clusters, transforming linguistic symbols into reusable "universal resources". The effectiveness of instrumental circulation depends on both the appropriateness of symbolic migration and the creativity of translation—neither rigid imitation nor stubborn adherence to barriers. Only by establishing flexible symbol conversion mechanisms can language tools maximize their value in task cluster collaboration.

3.3.2 Meaning proliferation: the creative reorganization of tools in cultural practice

Meaning proliferation represents an advanced integration of cultural tools and task-based collaboration, where linguistic instruments generate new meanings through creative recombination in cultural practices. Taking the formation process of China's "internet buzzwords" as an example: "involution" originally a technical academic term, was adopted by youth groups to describe excessive competition phenomena. When combined with symbols like "lying flat" and "Buddhist-style" attitudes, it ultimately evolved into cultural symbols expressing social mentality (Jun Zou, 2013). In task-based collaboration, this process manifests as students recombining cultural symbols from classical poetry (such as patriotic sentiments), logical tools from critical reading (like causal analysis), and practical methods from contemporary cultural participation (such as media expression) to create short video scripts that combine historical depth with real-world relevance. This recombination is not mechanical patchwork but organic integration based on cultural practice needs. Therefore, the core of meaning proliferation lies in students' role as cultural subjects who personalize language tools, ultimately forming a new meaning system transcending single-task collaboration boundaries.

4. The Operational Logic of Task Cluster Collaborative Driving Language Ability Development

After clarifying the relationship between cultural tools and task cluster collaboration, including the nature of language, the core of task cluster collaboration and the connection hub between them, it is necessary to move from theoretical relationship to practical operation, analyze how task cluster collaboration can effectively develop language ability through driving layer, process layer and output layer, so as to make the theory practical. (Figure 1)
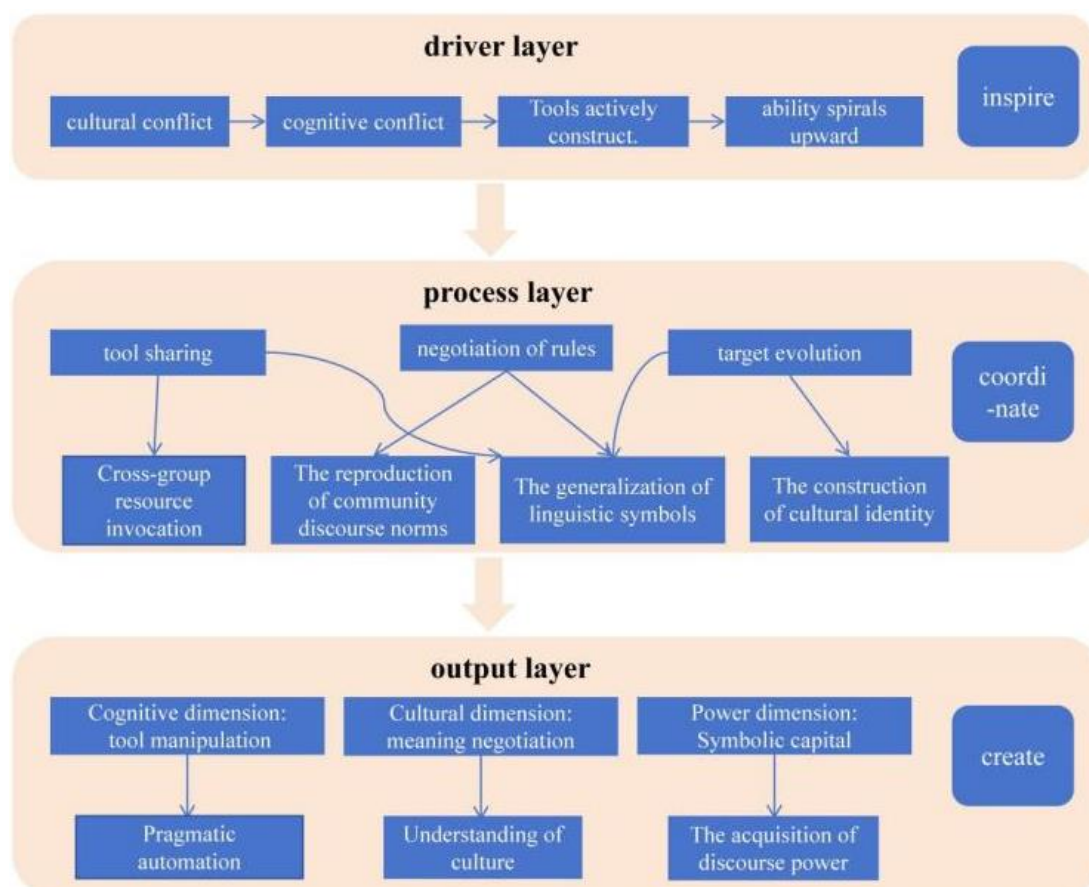
Figure 1: The operational logic of task cluster collaborative driving language ability development

4.1 Drive Layer: Cultural Conflicts Stimulate Tool Iteration

Cultural contradictions serve as the fundamental driving force behind language tool evolution and collaborative task clusters. As cultural symbols, languages inherently clash with both internal and external cultures—such as the tension between traditional filial piety values and modern egalitarian concepts, or the contradiction between casual internet slang and formal written language. These conflicts manifest in learning tasks as "cognitive conflicts": understanding the historical rationale of "foolish filial piety" through classical poetry analysis, and critiquing its modern ethical conflicts via critical thinking exercises. Such confrontations compel students to reflect on linguistic symbols' cultural contexts, propelling language tools from passive reception to active reconstruction. As Engestrom activity theory posits, systemic contradictions act as developmental engines. Cultural conflicts drive continuous upgrades in task cluster collaboration, progressing from initial "avoidance of conflict" to "acknowledgment of conflict", ultimately achieving "utilization of conflict". This iterative process enhances language tools' cultural adaptability, culminating in a spiral ascent of competence.

4.2 Process Layer: Three-level Collaboration to Achieve Capability Transition

4.2.1 Tool sharing: cross-system invocation of task cluster resource pool

Tool sharing forms the foundation of three-tier collaboration, manifested through cross-system invocation mechanisms in task cluster resource pools. This mechanism breaks down traditional teaching barriers of "resource silos" by establishing a shared repository encompassing linguistic symbols, cultural contexts, and practical scenarios. For instance, the "Literary Reading" task cluster contributes an "Imagery Repository" and "Rhetorical Devices Repository"; the "Practical Reading" task cluster provides a "Logical Framework Repository" and "Style Guidelines Repository"; while the "Cultural Engagement" task cluster supplements with a "Scenario Repository". The operation of these resource pools follows the "on-demand invocation" principle: when students complete cross-group tasks like "Writing a Letter to Ancient Figures", they can simultaneously access lyrical techniques from the literary repository, letter formats from the practical repository, and historical context knowledge from the cultural repository. The "system design" emphasized in "Quality Planning" highlights that the key to tool sharing lies in establishing resource indexing and invocation rules, ensuring rapid matching and efficient integration of language tools across different task clusters, thereby laying the material foundation for skill progression.

4.2.2 Theoretical model: Language symbols from "special tools" to "universal currency"

The universalization of linguistic symbols forms the core theoretical framework for task cluster collaboration, representing an evolution from "specialized tools" to "universal currency". Within individual task clusters, language symbols function as "specialized tools" —literary creation employs metaphorical constructs, while scientific reports utilize variable analysis—each serving specific purposes. Through collaborative processes, these symbols transcend boundaries to become cross-domain "universal currency". For instance, logical reasoning, originally a specialized tool for critical reading, can be transformed into analytical frameworks for literary criticism or structural guidelines for practical writing through collaboration. This transformation involves functional expansion rather than literal modification, mirroring how currency maintains its essence across diverse transactions. The universalization of linguistic symbols aims to cultivate students' core competency of "responding to all changes with constancy" —mastering symbolic functions rather than rigidly memorizing singular applications.

4.2.3 Rule negotiation: the reproduction of community discourse norms

Rule negotiation constitutes the reproduction process of "community discourse norms" in task cluster collaboration. Each task cluster maintains its default discourse rules: "literary discussions" encourage personalized interpretations, while "academic debates" demand authoritative arguments. These rules inevitably clash during collaborative processes. For instance, in cross-cultural communication tasks, the difference between "indirect expressions" and "direct statements" may lead to misunderstandings, necessitating learners to negotiate new rules and flexibly adjust expressions according to interlocutors and contexts. This negotiation isn't about one party compromising to another, but rather creating discourse norms through a "third space". The core of rule negotiation lies in understanding differences through dialogue and reaching consensus. Ultimately formed norms are neither exclusive to any task cluster nor simplistic compromises, but dynamic systems adaptable to diverse contexts. These norms provide institutional safeguards for the social development of language competence.

4.2.4 Goal evolution: from ability training to cultural identity construction

The evolution of objectives manifests in the transformation of task-based collaboration goals from "skill training" to "cultural identity construction". In the initial stage, collaborative objectives focus on enhancing specific skills, such as "mastering the three elements of argumentative essays" and "learning to write proposals". At the advanced stage, the emphasis shifts to cultivating students' cultural subjectivity through language practice, helping them understand "who I am" and "my relationship with culture". For instance, in "ancient poetry reading", students explore cultural roots; in "contemporary cultural participation", they express personal perspectives, ultimately forming a cultural identity that blends tradition and modernity. This progression aligns with Vygotsky's assertion that "higher psychological functions originate from socio-cultural contexts". Language competence is no longer an isolated skill set but an external manifestation of cultural identity. The ultimate significance of this goal evolution lies in the fact that task-based collaboration not only teaches students how to communicate but also helps them understand "who they speak for", ultimately achieving unity between linguistic proficiency and cultural identity.

4.3 Output Layer: Generation of Three Dimensions of Language Ability Development

4.3.1 Cognitive dimension: the refinement of tool operation

The development of cognitive-oriented language competence manifests as "mastery of tool operation" —pragmatic automation, where the application of linguistic symbols transitions from deliberate control to natural fluency. This process mirrors the breakthrough of the "plateau period" in skill acquisition: initially requiring conscious recall of format norms in practical writing and strenuous search for rhetorical devices in literary creation. As task collaboration deepens, students can automatically allocate language resources based on context—quickly generating well-structured emergency messages in emergencies or naturally selecting appropriate imagery during emotional expression. This automation is not mechanical repetition but a demonstration of "deep understanding". True pragmatic automation goes beyond mere speed and accuracy; it represents flexible mastery of language's essential functions. Students' ability to instinctively judge contextual sensitivities—such as "avoiding colloquial expressions in academic reports" or "using slang to enhance intimacy in peer communication" —marks the maturation of cognitive-level language competence.

4.3.2 Cultural dimension: the sensitivity of meaning negotiation

Culturally oriented language development manifests as linguistic acuity in meaning negotiation, with cross-cultural understanding at its core. As cultural symbols, languages carry contextual variations: "dragon" signifies auspiciousness in Chinese but often represents evil in Western contexts; "humility" is revered as virtue in Eastern traditions yet perceived as incompetence in Western workplaces. Task-based collaboration cultivates students 'ability to discern these cultural nuances and negotiate meanings through scenario-based learning. Comparative analysis of cultural symbols in "Chinese-foreign literary studies" and practice of meaning adaptation strategies in "cultural communication simulations" further develop this sensitivity. This linguistic acuity embodies "dual competence" —deeply understanding one's native language's cultural DNA while respecting and embracing foreign symbolic systems. Fundamentally, culturally oriented language competence constitutes cultural empathy, enabling dialogue and coexistence between diverse semantic worlds through the bridging role of linguistic symbols.

4.3.3 Power dimension: the power to control symbolic capital

The development of language competence in the power dimension manifests as mastery of symbolic capital, which equips individuals with discourse power. Bourdieu's field theory posits that language serves as the "symbolic expression" of social power (Practice and Reflection, 1998). Those who grasp mainstream discourse norms and apply them creatively gain greater social recognition. Task-based collaborative learning simulates authentic power dynamics, helping students accumulate symbolic capital: developing logical reasoning through critical thinking, mastering negotiation skills in public discourse through contemporary cultural engagement, and cultivating personalized expression through literary creation. This capability enhancement involves not merely "catering to power", but rather "employing power". Ultimately, this power-oriented linguistic competence empowers students as social agents to influence others and transform reality through language tools.

5. Reconstruction of the Paradigm of Chinese Language and Literature Education from the Perspective of Cultural Tools

After explaining the operational logic of task cluster collaborative driving language ability development and revealing its specific mechanism, it is necessary to examine the possible problems in this process, reflect on the possible tooling trap in Chinese language and literature education from the perspective of cultural tools, and then reconstruct the Chinese language and literature education paradigm to achieve the healthy and sustainable development of language ability.

5.1 Critique of Instrumental Rationality: Beware the Risk of Ability Alienation in Collaboration

5.1.1 The tooling trap: language becomes a means of cultural discipline

Instrumental rationality in task-based collaboration may lead to the "language instrumentalization trap", where language becomes a one-way tool for cultural indoctrination. Some teachers reduce linguistic competence to skills conforming to authoritative norms, forcing mechanical memorization of "standard answers" in classical poetry reading and rigidly adhering to formulaic templates in practical writing. This teaching approach extracts linguistic symbols from their cultural context, reducing them to tools that suppress diverse thinking. As cultural instrument theory critiques: when language loses its creative capacity for meaning construction and exists solely as an instrument of discipline, students' linguistic abilities become "tamed compliance" —skilled in mainstream discourse but lacking critical reflection. The former reduces language to a tool of cultural control, while the latter simplifies education into knowledge transmission techniques. Both deviate from the educational purpose of cultivating literacy. To avoid this pitfall, task-based collaboration must maintain space for "meaning questioning" and allow students to express diverse perspectives through language.

5.1.2 Synergistic paradox: standardization suppresses creativity

Task-based collaboration risks falling into the paradox of "standardization stifling creativity". In pursuit of efficiency, some educators establish uniform evaluation criteria across groups—requiring all essays to contain "three arguments" and discussions to follow "fixed procedures". While such standardization ensures organizational order, it suppresses linguistic diversity. Creative sparks in literary creation and spontaneous expressions of critical thinking may be deemed "non-compliant" and rejected. Overly rigid systems lead to stagnation; when task-based collaboration lacks tolerance for

"exceptions" and "breakthroughs", it becomes a production line of homogenized output. When collaboration focuses solely on superficial uniformity rather than fostering deep personal development, language evolution loses its momentum for variation. The solution lies in establishing "flexible standards" that preserve fundamental norms while reserving space for creative expression.

5.2 Liberation Path: Establish the Dialectical Unity of "Tool, Subject and Culture"

5.2.1 From tool use to tool creation: students as cultural producers

The primary path to breaking free from instrumental rationality lies in transforming students from "tool users" into "cultural producers". Cultural instrument theory emphasizes that the meaning of linguistic symbols is not fixed but continuously reconstructed through practice. Task-based collaborative learning should create scenarios where students engage in meaning-making (Peng Xu, 2020). In "literary reading", encourage personalized interpretations of classic texts; in "contemporary cultural participation", guide the creation of campus-themed internet jokes and micro-video scripts. This transformation requires teachers to abandon their authoritative role as "knowledge transmitters" and become "guides in meaning construction". The teaching focus should shift from "teaching students how to use language" to "supporting students in creating with language". Only when students realize they are not merely users of linguistic tools but also producers of cultural meaning can language competence break free from instrumental rationality and attain genuine creativity.

5.2.2 From ability development to identity awakening: subject construction in language practice

The essence of achieving the unity of "tool, subject, and culture" lies in guiding students from skill development to identity awakening. The pinnacle of language proficiency transcends mere "speaking"; it involves "becoming oneself through speech". Collaborative task clusters should foster identity-building practices: In classical poetry analysis, students engage with ancient thinkers to contemplate "ideal character"; through dialectical debates, they clarify value positions; via cross-cultural comparisons, they define cultural positioning. This process isn't abstract self-awareness but concrete linguistic practice. Students document their growth trajectories in writing, articulate life aspirations through speeches, ultimately anchoring "who I am" within the world of linguistic symbols. Identity awakening transforms language skills into deeply embedded expressions of cultural identity, values, and life ideals - this embodies the ultimate humanistic concern in Chinese language and literature education.

5.3 Theoretical Repositioning: The Contemporary Educational Significance of Cultural Tool View

5.3.1 Response to core literacy: cultural cultivation in language ability

The cultural instrument theory endows language proficiency with profound cultural depth within core competencies. The "language application ability" emphasized in core competencies transcends mere "listening, speaking, reading, and writing" skills. It represents a comprehensive literacy rooted in cultural soil, encompassing both the understanding and preservation of one's own cultural symbols and respect for and communication with other cultures. Guided by this cultural instrument theory, task-based collaborative learning integrates cultural cultivation throughout language acquisition. This approach resembles considering the humanistic dimension of technological ethics when crafting science fiction stories, forming a tripartite educational framework where language development, cultural inheritance, and value shaping synergize. Ultimately, this cultivates well-rounded individuals who possess both linguistic mastery and cultural confidence.

5.3.2 Implications for curriculum reform: the "cultural practicability" essence of task cluster collaboration

The cultural tool perspective reveals the "cultural practicality" essence of collaborative task clusters in language learning, offering crucial insights for curriculum reform. Task cluster collaboration should not be a mechanical combination of knowledge modules but an organic integration of practical applications. By creating authentic or simulated cultural scenarios, students develop competencies through problem-solving processes using language tools (Guoping Sun, Houjiang Huang, 2021). For instance, integrating three task clusters — "literary reading", "critical thinking expression", and "contemporary cultural participation" — into a community cultural investigation project allows students to write interview notes with literary flair, analyze survey data through critical analysis methods, and formulate improvement proposals using practical writing styles. This practice transcends classroom boundaries, transforming language learning into an engagement with cultural life. The value of task cluster collaboration lies not in the number of completed tasks, but in whether students truly become active participants in understanding, engaging with, and creating culture through language practice. This aligns with the core principle of curriculum reform shifting from knowledge-centered to competency-oriented education.

Acknowledgements

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