

Internationalization and English Language Teaching in Sino-Foreign Cooperative Colleges: A Study of Local and Foreign Teachers' Approaches

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Abstract

The internationalization of higher education has transformed global academic landscapes, fostering transnational partnerships and cross-cultural collaboration. In China, Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education (SFCE) programs have become a major vehicle for integrating international educational resources with domestic practices. This study explores the teaching approaches employed by local and foreign language teachers within SFCE programs, focusing on their strategies, challenges, and impact on English language learning. Using the College of International Business at Shenyang Normal University as a case study, the research investigates how differing pedagogical traditions foreign teachers' communicative, student-centered methods and local teachers' exam-oriented, teacher-centered approaches interact in bilingual classroom settings. The study employs a multiple case study design to examine teaching practices, collaboration, and student outcomes. Findings aim to enhance understanding of intercultural pedagogical integration, inform teacher development, and improve the quality of English instruction in cooperative colleges. Ultimately, this research contributes to optimizing English language education in China's internationalized higher education system.

Keywords: Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education, Internationalization, English Language Teaching, Teaching Approaches, Local and Foreign Teachers, Bilingual Education, Intercultural Pedagogy, Higher Education in China

Background of the Study

Internationalization is a process that increasingly influences and engages higher education institutions across the globe (Nawaz, 2018; Seeber & Cattaneo, 2020). At its core, the internationalization of higher education involves the global movement and deployment of educational resources. This process has accelerated the transformation of innovations, the creation of global knowledge, international academic collaborations, cross-border migration, and the expansion of overseas education markets. Since the 1990s, spurred by political and economic globalization and the rapid advancement of information technology, developed countries have led the way in higher education internationalization. Subsequently, many developing nations in Latin America, Asia, and Africa have actively joined this trend, making the internationalization of higher education a global phenomenon (Li, 2019). Higher education institutions have played an important role in building a community of common destiny for all mankind (Zhang, 2019). In China, the typical form of Internationalization is embodied by the Sino-foreign Cooperative colleges.

Globalization has rendered the internationalization of higher education unavoidable. Sino-foreign collaborative education serves as a significant representation of higher education internationalization in China (Yang, 2018). These Chinese-foreign cooperative programs are well-regarded among the Chinese population. Such programs involve educational institutions established through partnerships between foreign and Chinese educational entities within China (Ryan, 2020).

Currently, Sino-foreign cooperative programs generally refer to collaborations in higher education, vocational education, and other areas encouraged by the government. These programs are jointly established by Chinese universities and their foreign counterparts with similar academic focuses (Qin, 2019). Fundamentally, Sino-foreign cooperation in education shares a common characteristic: it is often affiliated with existing institutions. Typically, these collaborations take the form of first-level or second-level colleges within Chinese universities. In these partnerships, foreign universities provide knowledge and cultural capital, while Chinese institutions act as recipients. Such cooperation aims to introduce new disciplines, advanced educational concepts, teaching content, training methods, and management expertise that are urgently needed for China's economic development (Li, 2019).

In March 2013, the Ministry of Education released the "Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education Evaluation Scheme." This scheme evaluates Sino-foreign cooperative institutions and programs offering Bachelor's degrees or higher, focusing on compliance with regulations, the introduction of high-quality educational resources, educational quality, social benefits, and sustainable development capacity. The scheme also sets standards for Sino-foreign cooperative programs and outlines future development directions. The main goal of these programs in higher education is to combine high-quality foreign educational resources with domestic ones to enhance teaching standards, research capabilities, and management skills in China (Ryan, 2020).

It is evident that developed countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States are the primary partners for China's cooperative education programs. Successful Sino-foreign cooperation requires strong English language instruction as a prerequisite. High-quality English teaching is crucial for the sustainable development of these programs (Zhang, 2018).

Both college students and their parents are eager to broaden their horizons by receiving education from both Chinese and Western institutions, ensuring they are well-prepared for the future. One key requirement is access to professional guidance from foreign universities and instructors, along with passing exams like TOEFL or IELTS. Traditional college foreign language teaching methods are often insufficient for achieving the desired language proficiency. Therefore, improving English instruction is essential for addressing the challenges and enhancing the implementation of Sino-foreign cooperative programs. This, in turn, will foster the development of such programs and elevate the quality of internationalized talent in universities. Without a solid foundation in English or a deeper understanding of language and culture beyond merely passing exams, the success of Sino-foreign cooperative programs would be jeopardized (Ryan, 2020).

So far, more and more students have realized that they need to be proficient not only in their own major but also in one foreign language at least. It is also important and indispensable for students to develop themselves in the future career on condition that they have a good combination of expertise and English.

Under this circumstance, many Sino-foreign cooperative programs in running schools have been launched in Chinese universities to satisfy the global and the students' needs. Developing well-rounded talents who are proficient in foreign languages and cultures, as well as having specialized knowledge, has become an important goal for many universities. (Yan, 2024) These talents need to master a foreign language, possess cross-cultural communication skills, and be capable of handling various jobs in an international environment. (Dong, 2017) The strategy of cultivating international talents who are "proficient in one area, skilled in many" aims to meet the diverse needs of the country for foreign language professionals. (Guo, 2021) For instance, the Belt and Road Initiative involves multiple fields, such as trade, transportation, infrastructure, finance, e-commerce, and energy. Therefore, it is crucial to develop well-rounded talents with "specialized knowledge, foreign language skills, and cultural literacy". (Dong, 2017) Universities are actively exploring the cultivation of multilingual talents by innovating multilingual education pathways to meet the demands of the times. (Shanghai University of International Business and Economics, 2021) This initiative helps to build a global language knowledge system, cultivate multilingual talents for the new era, and provide strong support for international communication and cooperation. (Chen, Tu and Zhang, 2021)

Chinese President Xi Jinping also emphasized: "We must vigorously cultivate international talents who understand the Party and state policies, have a global vision, are well-versed in international rules, proficient in foreign languages, and skilled in Sino-foreign negotiations and communication. We should specifically train various professional and management talents who understand foreign languages and are urgently needed for initiatives such as the Belt and Road. Cultivating international talents who can promote China's international discourse system and contribute to building a community with a shared future for mankind is a key goal of current foreign language education." (Yan, 2024)

By the end of 2020, China had a total of 2,332 Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions and programs, of which 1,230 were at the undergraduate level or above. (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2020) These cooperative education programs covered 29 mainland

provinces and cities, involved nearly 40 regions, and included over 200 majors across 11 disciplines such as science, engineering, agriculture, medicine, law, and education. These programs enroll more than 150,000 students annually, with over 600,000 students currently enrolled, of which higher education accounts for more than 90%. Over 2 million students have graduated from these programs. (Ren & Tian, 2020)

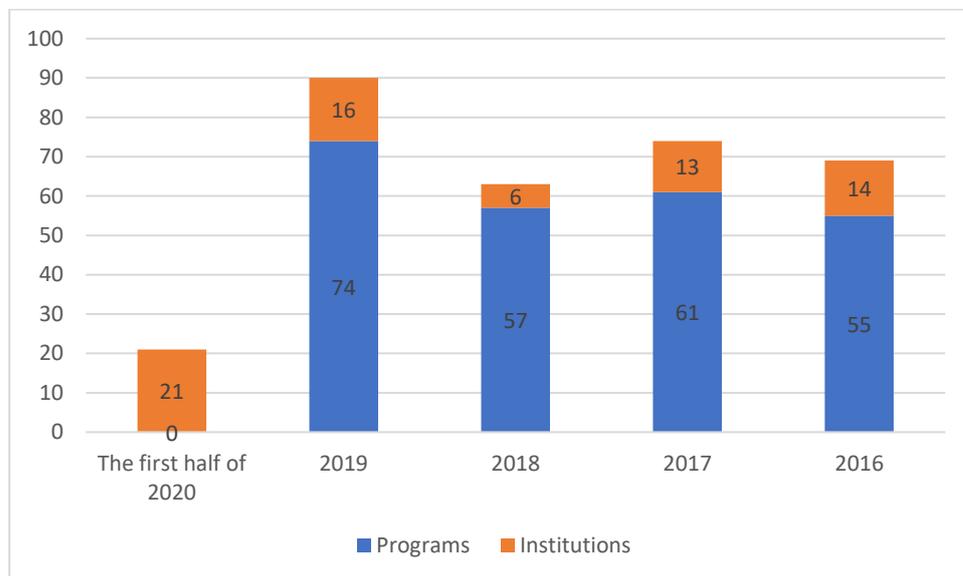


Figure 1:

The Number of Approved Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education Programs and Institutions from 2016 to 2020. (https://www.eol.cn/e_coop/gol/html/report2020/content.shtml)

By the year of 2022, a total of 74 Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions and programs was achieved in Liaoning Province, with 61% of them being science and engineering projects that directly serve priority development industries. Liaoning Province became the first province in Northeast China to pilot joint approval of Sino-foreign cooperative education by the Ministry of Education and provincial authorities. In 2022, it was approved for 10 undergraduate-level Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions and programs, as well as 757 joint postgraduate training programs with dual advisors from China and abroad, both ranking first in the country. (Cai, 2022)

Sino-foreign cooperative education in China has received strong support from national policies. Since the issuance of the “Interim Provisions on Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education” in 1995, these cooperative institutions and programs have experienced “rapid growth.” After more than 20 years of development, Sino-foreign cooperative education has made significant progress. (Ren & Tian, 2020)

Despite its immense potential, many issues have emerged in Sino-foreign cooperative programs at various universities. The quality and quantity of foreign teachers are inconsistent, and there is a significant variation in students’ English proficiency. Chinese college students often struggle to adapt to the diverse teaching styles, modes, and approaches of foreign teachers and local teachers, resulting in poor English learning outcomes. This is a serious problem and topic worth solving and exploring further. (Zhang, 2021)

Sino-foreign cooperative education has emerged as a significant model of international education in China, reflecting the country's commitment to globalizing its higher education system. This model involves partnerships between Chinese institutions and foreign universities, aiming to integrate international educational resources and practices into the local context. Sino-foreign cooperative education programs often emphasize bilingual or English-medium instruction, requiring collaboration between foreign and local language teachers to deliver curricula effectively. However, the differing teaching approaches of foreign and local educators have raised questions about the alignment of pedagogical practices and their impact on student learning outcomes.

Foreign language teachers, often from Western educational backgrounds, tend to employ student-centered, interactive, and communicative teaching methods that emphasize critical thinking, creativity, and active participation. In contrast, local Chinese teachers may lean toward more traditional, teacher-centered approaches, focusing on knowledge transmission, memorization, and exam-oriented learning. These divergent approaches can create challenges in achieving cohesive and effective teaching in Sino-foreign cooperative education programs. Understanding how these teaching approaches are implemented, perceived, and integrated is crucial for optimizing the quality of education in such collaborative environments.

The rapid expansion of Sino-foreign cooperative education programs in China has been driven by government policies, such as the Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020), which promotes international collaboration in education. By 2021, China had over 2,300 Sino-foreign cooperative education programs, involving partnerships with institutions from more than 30 countries (Ministry of Education of China, 2021). Despite this growth, research on the teaching approaches employed by foreign and local language teachers in these programs remains limited. Existing studies highlight cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical differences as key factors influencing teaching practices, but there is a need for deeper exploration into how these differences are navigated and reconciled in the classroom.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the teaching approaches of foreign and local language teachers in Sino-foreign cooperative education programs, focusing on their strategies, challenges, and the impact on student learning. By analyzing these dynamics, the research aims to provide insights into how collaborative teaching can be optimized to enhance educational outcomes in Sino-foreign cooperative education.

The College of International Business (CIB) at Shenyang Normal University is an ideal research subject for studying the efficacy of Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education (SFCE) teaching approaches by foreign and local language teachers. Its unique characteristics, regional significance, and alignment with national educational goals make it a representative case for exploring the challenges and opportunities in SFCE programs. Below are the key reasons for selecting CIB as the research subject.

1. Exemplary Model of Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education

CIB is a well-established institution under Shenyang Normal University, known for its successful implementation of SFCE programs. It has partnered with renowned foreign

universities, such as Fort Hays State University in the United States, to deliver high-quality bilingual and English-medium education. This collaboration provides a rich context for studying the integration of foreign and local teaching approaches (Ministry of Education of China, 2021).

2. Diverse Faculty Composition

CIB's faculty includes both foreign and local language teachers, offering a unique opportunity to compare and analyze their teaching methods. Foreign teachers bring international perspectives and innovative pedagogical practices, while local teachers contribute their expertise in the Chinese educational system and student needs. This diversity allows for a comprehensive examination of teaching efficacy (Zhang & Li, 2020).

3. Bilingual and Multicultural Learning Environment

CIB emphasizes bilingual (Chinese-English) instruction, which is a hallmark of SFCE programs. This environment not only enhances students' language proficiency but also creates a dynamic setting for studying the interaction between foreign and local teaching methods. The multicultural nature of CIB's classrooms reflects the broader goals of internationalizing Chinese higher education (Huang, 2019).

4. Regional Representation

Located in Northeast China, CIB represents a region that is often overlooked in studies on SFCE, which tend to focus on coastal cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou. Researching CIB provides insights into the unique challenges and opportunities of SFCE programs in less economically developed areas, contributing to a more balanced understanding of China's educational landscape (Wang, 2020).

5. Student-Centered Focus

CIB's student body is characterized by high English proficiency and a strong interest in international education. These students are directly impacted by the teaching approaches of foreign and local teachers, making them valuable participants in assessing the efficacy of these methods. Their feedback can provide critical insights into the strengths and weaknesses of SFCE teaching practices (Li & Bray, 2007).

6. Innovation in Teaching Practices

CIB has been at the forefront of adopting innovative teaching methods, such as flipped classrooms, project-based learning, and collaborative teaching models. These practices align with global educational trends and provide a fertile ground for studying how foreign and local teachers adapt to and implement modern pedagogical techniques (Zhang, 2018).

7. Policy Alignment and Support

CIB's development is supported by national and local policies aimed at promoting international education. For example, the Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) emphasizes the importance of SFCE in enhancing the quality of higher education. Studying CIB allows researchers to examine how these policies are implemented in practice (Ministry of Education of China, 2021).

8. Research Accessibility

As a well-documented institution with a history of successful SFCE programs, CIB provides ample data and resources for research. Its administration, faculty, and students are likely to be cooperative, enabling in-depth data collection and analysis. This accessibility enhances the feasibility and credibility of the study (Liu, 2019).

9. Addressing Research Gaps

Existing research on SFCE teaching approaches has largely focused on coastal regions, with limited attention to institutions like CIB in Northeast China. By selecting CIB as the research subject, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature and provides new insights into the efficacy of SFCE teaching methods in diverse regional contexts (Zhao, 2021).

10. Contribution to Broader Educational Goals

The findings from this research can inform policy and practice not only at CIB but also across other SFCE programs in China. By identifying best practices and areas for improvement, the study contributes to the broader goal of enhancing the quality and effectiveness of international education in China (Chen, 2017).

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to explore and analyze the teaching approaches employed by local and foreign language teachers in Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education (SFCE) colleges, with a particular focus on English language teaching. Using the College of International Business (CIB) at Shenyang Normal University as a case study, the research aims to examine how differing pedagogical traditions—local teachers' exam-oriented, teacher-centered methods and foreign teachers' communicative, student-centered approaches—are implemented, integrated, and perceived in bilingual classroom contexts. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the strategies, challenges, and collaborative dynamics influencing these teaching practices, and to evaluate their impact on students' English language proficiency, intercultural competence, and academic engagement. Additionally, the research intends to bridge the existing gap in literature by providing an in-depth understanding of intercultural pedagogical integration in SFCE programs, particularly in underrepresented regions such as Northeast China. Ultimately, the study aspires to propose practical recommendations for enhancing teacher training, curriculum design, and institutional support mechanisms that foster effective collaboration between local and foreign educators, thereby improving the overall quality and sustainability of English language teaching in China's internationalized higher education system.

Significance of the study

The study holds significant implications for the field of English language education in Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools. Here are some key points to understand the significance:

Globalization and Internationalization: Sino-foreign cooperative colleges aim to provide a globalized and international education experience. English is often the medium of instruction in these institutions. By exploring the more positive teaching modes and approaches, these colleges can better prepare students for a globalized world where English proficiency is crucial.

Teaching modes and approaches utilized by local and foreign teachers: Exploring the teaching approaches used by local and foreign teachers at Sino-foreign cooperative colleges holds great significance. (Li, 2021)

1. **Culture Integration:** Language learning is also culture learning, and the two are interwoven in language instruction. Incorporating local culture into foreign language teaching helps bridge connections between the local and foreign cultures. By telling stories about China, teachers can enhance students' culture awareness, language proficiency, and confidence. This shared appreciation of civilization fosters understanding among culturally diverse backgrounds. (Li, 2021)
2. **Interdisciplinary Research:** To effectively integrate local culture, interdisciplinary research is essential. This includes studying discourse construction, communication modes, and evaluating communicative effectiveness. Additionally, designing foreign language curricula and teaching materials that incorporate cultural content ensures a holistic learning experience. (Mattia & Shih-Ching, 2023)
3. **Interdisciplinary Research:** To effectively integrate local culture, interdisciplinary research is essential. This includes studying discourse construction, communication modes, and evaluating communicative effectiveness. Additionally, designing foreign language curricula and teaching materials that incorporate cultural content ensures a holistic learning experience. (Wen et al, 2024)
4. **Benefits for Students:** Exploring teaching approaches enriches students' perspectives, broadens their horizons, and prepares them for global interactions. It cultivates intercultural competence and fosters appreciation for diverse cultural backgrounds. (Wen et al, 2024)

In summary, understanding how local and foreign teachers approach teaching in Sino-foreign cooperative colleges contributes to a more enriching educational experience for students

Enhancing English Proficiency: English is a vital skill for students at Sino-foreign cooperative colleges, as it helps them communicate, collaborate, and compete in the global job market. Innovative teaching modes and approaches can make English learning more engaging and practical. (Chia, 2021) By exploring new teaching modes and approaches, colleges can tailor their English instruction to meet individual student needs, thereby improving learning outcomes.

Teacher Professional Development: Implementing new teaching modes often requires training and professional development for educators. This exploration can lead to opportunities for teachers to enhance their skills and adapt to modern teaching methodologies.

Competitive Advantage: Sino-foreign cooperative colleges face competition in attracting students. Offering cutting-edge English teaching modes and approaches can be a unique selling point that draws students and parents to these institutions.

Research and Innovation: Conducting research on new teaching modes and approaches contributes to the advancement of educational practices. It can also lead to the development of best practices that can be shared with other educational institutions.

Adaptation to Changing Times: The world of education is evolving rapidly, and COVID-19 accelerated the shift towards online and blended learning. The approaches utilized by teachers should be reconsidered and reconstructed. Exploring future teaching modes and approaches ensures that Sino-foreign cooperative colleges remain relevant and adaptable to changing educational landscapes.

Government Initiatives: The Chinese government has been actively promoting Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools. By aligning with these initiatives, Sino-foreign cooperative colleges can benefit from government support and resources to improve English teaching conditions based on which better English approaches are carried out so that students will prefer to learn English.

Cultural Exchange: English teaching often involves the exchange of ideas and cultures. Exploring innovative teaching modes and approaches utilized by local and foreign teachers can facilitate greater cultural exchange, enriching the educational experience for both Chinese and foreign students.

What's more, the expected theoretical contributions of this study are numerous. First of all, the research aims to explore the teaching approaches and modes utilized by local and foreign teachers at CIB in SNU. The hope is to explore and conclude balanced and better approaches suitable for local teachers and foreign teachers to exert to improve students' English language performance and their academic achievements. Second, the expectation is to conceptualize and describe the relationship and difference between local teachers and foreign teachers in the language teaching.

Findings and Discussion

The primary methodological strength lies in the use of a case study design, which applies the logic of replication. "in which the inquirer replicates the procedures for each case" (Creswell, 2007). Cases then can be further studied comparatively so as to probe into similarities and differences. Since the purpose of the research is to inquire into the approaches utilized by local and foreign teachers, to analyze how the local and foreign teachers carry out the language teaching procedures. This will provide a more convincing description, and "claims for generalizability can be made more convincingly by coordinating and aggregating evidence from a number of individual case studies" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

In this research, a multiple case study is characterized as an in-depth, comprehensive approach to conducting the investigation, description, and analysis of several cases. (Merriam, 1998). The bounded system or the case is a college, but the purposeful sampling of more cases is believed to lead to "better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases" (Stake, 2005).

It is expected that pedagogical contributions will focus on the English language teaching. Findings about barriers and challenges that local and foreign teachers confront in the teaching practices can inform the way or approach that local and foreign teachers are utilizing.

Besides, significance of this study first lies in its potential to fill a very important gap in the research on the efficacy of teaching approaches utilized by foreign and local language teachers in Sino-foreign cooperative colleges in Chinese universities and it explores the barriers and challenges for local and foreign teachers in relation to how to exert more effective methods in the language teaching practices. Second, the significance of the study lies in its potential in: 1) providing local and foreign teachers with suggestions and recommendations that can help enhance the English classes offline and online. 2) providing local and foreign teachers with valuable insights into how they cooperate with each other and learn from each other. and 3) providing school administrators with practical recommendations.

This study can also make significant contributions to both teachers' teaching practices and students' learning outcomes. These contributions are critical for improving the quality of education in Sino-foreign cooperative programs and ensuring their alignment with global standards while addressing local needs. Below are the key contributions to teachers' teaching practices.

1. Enhanced Collaboration and Integration:

The study can provide insights into how foreign and local teachers can better collaborate and integrate their teaching methods. By identifying best practices and addressing challenges, it can foster a more cohesive and effective teaching environment (Zhang & Li, 2020).

2. Professional Development:

The findings can inform targeted professional development programs for both foreign and local teachers. For example, foreign teachers may benefit from training on local educational norms, while local teachers can learn innovative, student-centered approaches (Huang, 2019).

3. Adaptation of Teaching Methods:

The study can highlight how teaching methods can be adapted to suit the unique context of SFC institutions. This includes balancing student-centered approaches with exam-oriented requirements to meet both international and local standards (Wang & Byram, 2011).

4. Improved Resource Allocation:

By identifying disparities in resources and support, the study can guide institutions in providing equitable access to teaching tools, training, and materials for both foreign and local teachers (Li & Bray, 2007).

5. Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness:

The study can promote cultural sensitivity and awareness among teachers, helping them navigate cultural differences and create an inclusive learning environment (Chen, 2017).

Conclusion

The internationalization of higher education has profoundly transformed the educational landscape in China, and Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education (SFCE) represents a key mechanism in this transformation. Through the integration of international pedagogical

models and domestic educational practices, SFCE programs have become vital platforms for cultivating globally competent, bilingual, and culturally aware graduates. This study, focusing on the College of International Business (CIB) at Shenyang Normal University, has explored the teaching approaches employed by local and foreign teachers, their respective challenges, and the ways in which these diverse pedagogical traditions interact within bilingual classrooms. The findings highlight that while foreign teachers generally adopt communicative, student-centered, and interactive teaching styles that emphasize creativity and critical thinking, local teachers often adhere to structured, exam-oriented, and teacher-centered methods grounded in national academic standards. The coexistence of these contrasting approaches presents both opportunities and tensions within SFCE programs. Effective collaboration between local and foreign educators requires mutual understanding, cultural adaptability, and institutional support to bridge pedagogical differences.

The study underscores the essential role of English language teaching as a cornerstone of internationalized education. English serves not only as a medium for academic exchange but also as a gateway to global communication and career advancement. Strengthening English pedagogy through innovative, culturally responsive, and contextually relevant teaching methods is therefore crucial for sustaining the quality and competitiveness of SFCE institutions. The research also reveals that ongoing professional development, cross-cultural dialogue, and shared curriculum design can significantly enhance teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. From a policy perspective, the study contributes valuable insights for improving teacher recruitment, training, and management in SFCE programs. It advocates for the establishment of professional learning communities that encourage exchange between local and foreign teachers, the adoption of flexible and hybrid teaching models, and the continuous assessment of educational quality aligned with both national and international standards. For students, the integration of diverse teaching approaches fosters not only linguistic proficiency but also intercultural competence—an essential attribute in today's interconnected world.

This study affirms that the success of Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education depends on achieving pedagogical synergy between local and foreign educators. By combining the strengths of both traditions—rigor and structure from the local context, and innovation and interaction from international practices—China's SFCE institutions can create a more balanced, inclusive, and globally oriented educational model. The findings thus contribute to the broader discourse on international education reform and provide practical recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness, sustainability, and global relevance of English language teaching within China's evolving higher education system.

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