

**IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND EXPERIENTIAL CULTURAL PEDAGOGY — STARTING FROM SUSAN SONTAG'S AGAINST INTERPRETATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

Susan Sontag's critique of excessive interpretation and theorization, along with her emphasis on direct experience, aligns with the principles of experiential cultural pedagogy in intercultural communication. This paper analyzes the concept of experiential cultural pedagogy, interprets Sontag's *Against Interpretation* theory, and explores the implementation and significance of experiential pedagogy within the context of intercultural communication. It highlights the commonalities between experiential cultural pedagogy and the "Against Interpretation" theory. Finally, the paper examines the role of experiential cultural pedagogy in intercultural communication from three perspectives: the critique of over-interpretation and theorization, the importance of bodily perception and emotional experience, and cultural reflection.

**Keywords:** Against Interpretation; Intercultural Communication; Experiential Cultural Pedagogy.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The cultivation of learners' intercultural communication competence is a critical issue in second language teaching. Scholars have engaged in extensive discussions on topics such as the relationship between language and culture, the definition of culture, the development of students' cultural competence, the nurturing of intercultural communication awareness, the balance between knowledge and skill acquisition in teaching, and the roles and responsibilities of both teachers and students under new pedagogical paradigms. However, a comprehensive and effective teaching methodology has long been elusive. Through years of research and practice in Chinese language teaching, we have identified the Performed-Culture Approach, pioneered by Professor Galal Walker, as a practical and effective method for cultivating successful intercultural communicators.

Susan Sontag's critique of excessive interpretation and theorization, along with her emphasis on direct sensory experience, resonates with the core principles of the Performed-Culture Approach in intercultural communication. This paper will analyze the Performed-Culture Approach in the context of intercultural communication, drawing upon the theoretical framework of Sontag's *Against Interpretation*.

**2. THE IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE OF THE PEDAGOGY OF PERFORMING ANOTHER CULTURE**

**2.1 The Pedagogical Concept of Performing Another Culture**

The Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture integrates language, culture, and communication in a coherent manner, placing culture at the core of instruction. Its teaching goal is to cultivate students' ability to participate in the target-language cultural community, with cultural stories as

the core content and performance as the primary learning method. It also redefines the roles and tasks of both teachers and students, breaking away from traditional methods that focus on language element acquisition. This approach enables the development of students' intercultural communication skills. This pedagogical concept aligns with the current global demands for foreign language professionals and is consistent with some of the latest teaching philosophies advocated in the field of foreign language education.

Traditional foreign language teaching programs mostly use language-centered methods, viewing language as a system of symbols composed of phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary. The goal of foreign language teachers is to help students master these language elements, with foreign language learning primarily relying on translation between the students' native language and the target language. Compared to language learning, cultural learning is often neglected or marginalized, resulting in students who might exhibit "mute English" or "mute Chinese" — having some foreign language reading and writing skills but severely lacking in listening and speaking abilities. More critically, even when students can communicate in the foreign language, their expressions often rely too heavily on direct translation from their native language, sounding awkward, unnatural, and non-native, which can be confusing to native speakers of the target language and potentially lead to misunderstandings. Additionally, students trained by such methods often lack intercultural communication awareness and may not understand or be willing to adjust their communication styles, making it difficult for them to interact smoothly with native speakers. The Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture posits that foreign language teaching should be cultural teaching, with language instruction being just one component of cultural education; it advocates for placing culture at the center of foreign language teaching.

Moreover, The Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture shifts the focus from lecture-based instruction to performance-based instruction. In traditional foreign language classrooms, the primary activities involve the teacher explaining vocabulary and grammar using the students' native language, conducting pronunciation drills, sentence pattern exercises, word substitutions, sentence creation, error correction, translation activities, or teaching about the target culture. In contrast, in a classroom using the Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture, the main activities involve students performing various communicative activities they might encounter in the target culture using the target language. Students assume different social roles and perform cultural stories according to the cultural norms of the target language context, thereby developing their ability to function within the target culture.

## **2.2 From Essential Authenticity to Experiential Authenticity**

In a classroom using The Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture, students experience more than just the content presented in textbooks or expressed by the teacher; they undergo an immersive experience of the target culture. This "authenticity" is not the essential reality of the entire social life but rather a highly contextualized and micro-level authenticity. Within the specific context of the classroom, this authenticity affects students' emotional states "at that moment," evoking resonance or identification, thereby achieving a shared understanding of the target culture. Thus, it is a form of authenticity with clear cultural intent. The teacher's approach to realizing this authenticity involves extracting specific social and cultural segments from the broader target culture to create a predefined student experience, leading to an "experiential authenticity" of the target culture. In essence, The Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture seeks a contextualized authenticity through decontextualized creative methods, grounded in student experience. As Susan

Sontag puts it, “What is important now is to restore our senses. We need to learn to see more, to hear more, and to feel more.” Only those authentic experiences that can be perceived and identified are truly existent.

### **3. INTERPRETATION OF THE "AGAINST INTERPRETATION" THEORY**

#### **3.1 Focus on the Form of Artistic Works**

Before beginning her essay *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag quotes a line from Oscar Wilde's letters: “Only the shallowest people do not judge by appearances. The secret of the world is visible, not invisible.” As a representative of aestheticism, Wilde's words overflow with disdain for tradition, provocation, and a superior attitude of rejecting the mundane. By quoting Wilde, Sontag immediately signals her focus on appearances and the visible—on form. This indicates her distinctive rejection of traditional content-oriented approaches.

The emphasis on content has led people to focus excessively on the intellectual aspect of art, often neglecting the sensory experience, and causing culture to fall into a dilemma of intellectual overinflation at the cost of vitality and sensibility. Consequently, the world becomes barren and depleted. In response to this predicament, Sontag proposes a counterpoint to content-focused approaches: shifting attention from the content of art to its form, reclaiming the sensory experience of art, and restoring the capacity to feel and engage with the body.

Sontag argues, “Our task is not to extract the maximum amount of content from artworks, nor to squeeze more content from works that are already clear and understandable. Our task is to diminish content so that we can see the work itself.”[2] According to Sontag, emphasizing form can diminish content. Creators can and should, by maximizing the emphasis on form, free their works from the erosion of content on their pure artistic value, thus offering viewers a fresh sensory impact. Criticism should serve the artwork, not usurp its position.

First, there is a need to focus more on the form in art, with a broader and more thorough description of form to counteract the arrogance of interpretation driven by an excessive emphasis on content. Secondly, a set of descriptive words is needed for form, rather than normative terms. The best and most original criticism is that which shifts attention from content to form. “The function of criticism should be to show how it is thus, even that it is thus, rather than to show what it means.”[2] Finally, there is a need for a language that can accurately, incisively, and meticulously describe the appearance of artworks. This task is even more challenging than formal analysis because it reveals the sensual surface of art.

#### **3.2 Valuing a New Aesthetic Sensory Experience**

According to Sontag's perspective, “against interpretation” means rejecting abstract interpretations of meaning, opposing the focus of criticism on the external world referenced by the text. Instead, it advocates for a genuine and direct sensory experience of art, championing a “new sensibility” in art. Sontag's greatness lies in her awareness of the modern individual's helplessness and hopelessness in experiencing art. She argues that traditional content-focused criticism, rooted in rationalism, diminishes the importance of sensory perception in understanding the world and denies the multiple possibilities of human engagement with it. Interpretation, in her view, takes the sensory experience of art for granted and neglects it. Excessive interpretation leads to engaging not with the art itself, but with a mere replica of the artwork, resulting in a gradual loss of sensitivity in sensory experience. Thus, Sontag strongly urges people to critique based on their own feelings

and perceptions rather than past evaluative standards. She calls for learning to see more, hear more, and feel more, to reveal the sensory surface of art.

Proposing a new sensibility is a correction to the longstanding bias of overemphasizing content, with the aim of restoring the artistic nature of artworks. The "new" in "new sensibility" refers to a response to the traditional focus on content interpretation, addressing contemporary cultural phenomena. More importantly, it affirms the multiplicity of human engagement with the world. It highlights the epistemological significance and value of sensory experience.[3]

The new sensibility views contemporary art as an abstract form and style that appeals to sensation, emotion, and perceptual experience. It involves the analysis and expansion of sensory experiences. Sontag believes that such styles and forms can provide a new sensibility, helping to avoid the alienation people experience during the technological process. In her words, it serves as "shock therapy" to address the collective sensory numbness developed during industrialization. In this sense, the new aesthetic sensibility not only aims to establish "a new type of society... and become a form of society itself"[4], but also reshapes individuals, becoming an important aspect of human freedom.

#### **4. IMPLEMENTATION OF CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

##### **4.1 Culture, Language, and Experience**

The concepts of culture and behavior discussed in this section are analogous to grammar in language. The main difference is that the content of a culture is far broader and more complex than a grammar. For example, my knowledge of Chinese grammar enables me to articulate thoughts appropriately without prior preparation, with both the content and form being mostly correct. When I wish to speak, I can do so naturally, trusting that I do not need to pre-plan my pronunciation, vocabulary, and phrases. Similarly, my knowledge of Chinese culture allows me to participate in social activities and interpersonal interactions without extensive prior preparation. However, just as my knowledge of Chinese grammar does not guarantee that what I say will always be correct or beneficial, my knowledge of Chinese culture does not ensure the success of all my social interactions. Knowledge of a particular culture provides a foundation for participating in social exchange and collaboration, but success or failure depends on the nature of these interactions themselves. In short, such knowledge merely introduces us to the game. The goal of foreign language learning is to repeatedly instill culturally normative behaviors and conventions in language and society.

Culture is a complex phenomenon, much like human beings who possess the ability to think. As language educators, we do not simply cater to the academic tradition that treats culture as a separate discipline. However, we can identify and prepare some tangible, performable "major components" that can be reasonably explained within a coherent cultural concept. The immediate effect of this approach is that meaning precedes linguistic encoding. This perspective on communication is not entirely aligned with how most linguists view language. As Randy Allen Harris notes:

"The methods linguists use to examine language are essentially random, much like how physicists examine matter and biologists examine life; among them, the most significant are those methods used by surveyors. They divide the vast terrain between sound and meaning into more manageable areas. The boundaries between these areas are often contentious and differ on highly specialized issues... but the existence of these boundaries and the main issues they address are well

established. Traditionally defined, phonetics focuses on the sound system of language, phonology studies how these sound systems cluster into distinct signals, morphology investigates how these signals combine into meaningful units, syntax examines how these meaningful units are arranged into expressive sequences, and semantics studies the meaning generated by these sequences.”[5]

This interpretation of the from-the-surface-to-the-core approach in language research typically reflects a linguistic tradition that stitches meaning into the process of encoding language from simple to complex. At the core of this view is the notion of treating sentences as containers of meaning. As a method for learning language, cultural performance begins with meaning and treats linguistic encoding, along with its conceptual sentences, as a medium for participation, thereby allowing a deeper engagement with meaning. As a discipline, language is constructed within a cultural framework and is inseparably linked to behavior. It necessitates that cultural performance be regarded as an essential teaching method rather than an optional choice.

In the context of language teaching methodology, the concept of "cultural performance" takes into account the ambiguity of this term in sociological and literary studies. It encompasses "performative" activities and visible actions, rather than abstract categories of behavior, similar to how knowledge in specific contexts relates to essential or idealized knowledge. A careful consideration of performable culture connects terms and concepts that are not often confused or interchangeable. Culture exists as a complex knowledge structure within society, which is, in turn, associated with specific civilizations. Thus, cultural performance becomes a series of isolated events within civilizational behavior, which can represent real or ideal behavioral patterns in the target society. These events can range from simple greetings to complex negotiations of disagreements without causing offense. In foreign language learning, gaining an on-the-ground understanding of a foreign culture requires conscious, repetitive training in behaviors expected by the target culture. Therefore, a primary task in designing a language course is to select, analyze, and present cultural events that students can perform and teachers can evaluate. Just as in other performance contexts, in language teaching, performance involves the deliberate repetition of "set events."

#### **4.2 Components of Cultural Performance**

In intercultural communication, cultural performance should clearly define aspects such as teaching objectives and procedures, including intentions, the significance of the settings, and instructional design.[6]

Firstly, the goal of intercultural communication is to establish intentions within the target culture. In a particular social environment, if you want to successfully engage in social activities, your intentions must be recognized and accepted by the people you are interacting with. Simultaneously, you must be able to understand their intentions. Without mutual understanding of intentions, even the most creative use of language will fail to convey your meaning effectively. In other words, individuals operate within a set framework in a given culture, which includes four components: cultural context generates meaning, context dictates significance, significance expresses intention, and intention determines the individual.

Secondly, culture is the source of meaning, and thus communication in a specific language requires interaction within a particular cultural framework. This means that conversations between people from different cultural backgrounds must be understood either according to the target culture or the native culture. Second language learners may be expected to be familiar with both the culture of the language they are speaking and their own native culture. If two people from different

cultures are conversing, the most effective strategy to achieve the desired understanding is to aim for communication within the cultural context of the language being used. If both the native speaker and the second language learner are aware of the native culture of the second language, a second-best approach might be to use one language while interpreting through another culture. When both parties interpret the conversation through their respective cultures, confusion or misunderstandings are most likely to occur.

Finally, we can create teaching scenarios and methods to build memory of the target culture, that is, to use immersive experiences to allow students to intuitively experience the target culture and thus construct a memory of it. If the core of successfully acquiring a second language or completing intercultural communication smoothly depends on a series of increasingly complex interactions within the foreign culture, then the process of gaining the ability to successfully complete these interactions is essentially a process of constructing extensive memory. Moreover, memory provides context for communication within a culture, and with the support of memory, our sensory faculties can operate within these contexts. This creates a cyclical process of context-memory-context, which in turn enhances intercultural communication skills.

## **5. THE ROLE OF CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SUSAN SONTAG'S "AGAINST INTERPRETATION"**

The Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture is a method that emphasizes learning and understanding culture through bodily and sensory experiences. The core concept is to enhance cultural understanding by directly participating in and experiencing cultural activities. This approach prioritizes active student engagement and experience, encouraging learners to explore cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors through physical expression, vocalization, emotion, and contextual reenactment. By using this pedagogical method, students can experience and enact roles from different cultures within simulated scenarios, thereby improving their intercultural communication skills. It aids students in transcending language and cultural differences, fostering deeper and more authentic intercultural connections through bodily and emotional resonance.

Echoing the Ideas of "Against Interpretation," the Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture Attempts to Go Beyond Excessive Explanation and Theorization by Delving into Culture Through Direct Sensory Experience. This pedagogical approach emphasizes a deep understanding and experience of culture through bodily participation and emotional engagement. It stresses the importance of learners actively participating in and perceiving communication practices and social behaviors from different cultural backgrounds, rather than merely relying on rational explanation and analysis. This resonates with Sontag's perspective of treating culture as a domain of direct perception and emotional experience, rather than merely a system of symbols to be interpreted and understood. This section will analyze the Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture from the perspective of "Against Interpretation."

### **5.1 Opposing Excessive Explanation and Theorization**

Susan Sontag argues that excessive explanation and theorization can deprive works of their uniqueness and emotional depth. Interpretation of culture and works should not rely too heavily on abstract theoretical frameworks and rigid interpretative methods but should instead focus on direct experience and emotional resonance. Sontag advocates for an approach to interpreting and

understanding works that emphasizes their inherent uniqueness and emotional content, rather than attributing their significance to theoretical or interpretative statements.

In the context of intercultural communication, the Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture aligns with Sontag's perspective by seeking to help students achieve a deeper understanding and expression of culture through direct experience and emotional resonance. This approach emphasizes bodily participation, role-playing, and situational simulation, allowing students to engage directly in cultural practices and experience the emotions and contexts of the culture. The Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture focuses on contextualized learning and bodily involvement to help students move beyond excessive explanation and theorization, facilitating intercultural communication in a more direct, authentic, and personalized manner. This method of direct engagement and emotional resonance aids in transcending theoretical interpretations, enabling students to grasp and appreciate the uniqueness of culture through their own experiences and emotional expressions.

Second language acquisition provides a clear example of this phenomenon. For instance, in the context of English learning in China, most learners begin their English studies during the nine-year compulsory education period. Despite starting relatively early and having a long period of study, many learners still do not achieve their desired level of proficiency. This is largely due to the emphasis in English teaching on phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar explanations. While these aspects of language ability are improved, communicative competence often remains underdeveloped. In contrast, individuals who were born and raised in English-speaking countries or who study abroad tend to have higher levels of English proficiency and communicative skills. This is because they learn within an English-speaking environment, where cultural performance takes place silently, thus accelerating language acquisition. This explains why many people prefer to choose foreign teachers or engage directly with native speakers to practice their foreign language skills. It also underscores the fact that language learning and intercultural communication cannot rely solely on interpretation; excessive explanation and theorization are counterproductive to language acquisition.

## **5.2 Bodily Perception and Emotional Experience**

In intercultural communication, we rely not only on rational thinking and linguistic expression but also on bodily perception and emotional experience to gain a deeper understanding and expression of culture. Our bodily perception and emotional experience are key pathways to understanding and expressing culture. Sontag advocates for transcending purely rational analysis and suggests that we should achieve a more comprehensive and nuanced cultural understanding through bodily perception and emotional experience.

When introducing Chinese Spring Festival culture to a foreigner, no matter how vivid and detailed the description may be, it is challenging for them to truly grasp the essence. However, if they were to visit China, they could witness the festive decorations, hear the sounds of celebration, taste traditional Spring Festival foods, and participate in unique folk activities. Even without verbal explanations, they would be able to experience the cultural atmosphere and charm directly. In intercultural communication, the Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture emphasizes the importance of bodily perception and emotional experience. By engaging in various participatory activities such as role-playing and situational simulations, students can directly immerse themselves in and experience the culture. These activities allow students to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the culture through bodily perception and emotional experience.

Through bodily perception, students can establish a direct connection with culture by means of touch, sensation, and movement. For example, when learning a specific dance form, students can experience the rhythm, posture, and emotional expression of the dance through their bodily sensations. Through emotional experience, students can establish an emotional resonance with the work and context, thereby understanding and appreciating the emotional connotations and values of the culture. This approach of bodily perception and emotional experience helps to transcend purely rational interpretation and expression, facilitating intercultural communication in a more intuitive and immersive manner. It allows students to interact with culture in a more comprehensive and authentic way through bodily sensations and emotional experiences, thereby achieving deeper and more meaningful intercultural exchanges.

### 5.3 Cultural Reflection

In the context of the Pedagogy of Performing Another Culture, reflection plays a significant role. By engaging in situational simulations and role-playing, students have the opportunity to critically examine and challenge their own cultural biases and stereotypes. These activities encourage learners to reflect on their experiences and perceptions, and to engage in discussions with peers. This process fosters greater awareness and acceptance of cultural diversity, enhancing intercultural sensitivity and adaptability. Through reflection and dialogue, students can deepen their understanding and respect for cultural differences.

Consider an example of cultural differences: an American hosts a Chinese guest for tea and snacks. The American host would offer beverages or food for the guest to choose from but generally would not insist that the guest accept them. Most American hosts would avoid expressing their own preferences, believing that allowing the guest to choose independently is more polite, even if the guest's choice may not be what the host provided. This is reflected in the common American phrase: "Please feel free, don't be shy."

On the other hand, a Chinese guest might avoid immediately accepting the host's offer of drinks or snacks and may refrain from answering questions like "What would you like?" They consider it polite not to actively request anything beyond what the host has provided. When asked what they would like, Chinese guests might often respond with a courteous phrase such as "Please follow the host's wishes."

In such a simple invitation scenario, to ensure both parties are satisfied—meaning the host feels they have been a good host, and the guest feels they have been a gracious guest—there are three basic options:

(1) Use the Chinese context: the guest declines the snacks a suitable number of times, while the host continues to insist until the guest either accepts the snacks or sets them aside.

(2) Use the American context: the host offers a choice of snacks and waits for the guest to make a selection.

(3) Adopt a transcultural strategy: both the host and guest recognize the behavioral conflict arising from the Chinese and American cultural backgrounds and openly discuss how to proceed in a mutually satisfactory manner.

In such simple social interactions, culture also provides context. If both parties are aware of their differing expectations but cannot act according to each other's expectations, they can reach a temporary consensus by discussing the issue and agreeing on a mutually acceptable approach. This transcultural strategy often requires immersion in actual communicative practices to be learned



effectively; relying solely on explanations may confuse students, leaving them unsure of how to proceed. It is through cross-cultural communicative practice that individuals can engage in reflection. This reflection not only involves experiencing and understanding the differences between cultures but also challenging cultural biases and stereotypes, leading to a deeper understanding and respect for diverse cultures.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Susan Sontag expressed concern about the trend of excessive interpretation in art, arguing that it diminishes people's ability to directly experience art. She observed that excessive interpretation transforms art from an object of direct sensation into one of intellectual contemplation. Furthermore, Sontag emphasized the importance of sensory experience in art, advocating for direct engagement with and experience of art rather than understanding it through interpretation and analysis. This perspective, which critiques excessive interpretation and emphasizes direct sensory engagement, aligns closely with the principles of cultural performance teaching methods in cross-cultural communication.

This paper explores the implementation and impact of cultural performance teaching methods in cross-cultural interactions, highlighting the similarities between this approach and Sontag's theory of rejecting excessive interpretation. It concludes by analyzing the role of cultural performance teaching methods in cross-cultural communication from three perspectives: resisting excessive explanation and theorization, engaging in bodily perception and emotional experience, and promoting cultural reflection.

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