

Understanding the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) of the Chinese-English Major Students in Chengdu College University of Electronic Science and Technology, China

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Abstract

This study was conducted in Chengdu College of University of Electronic Science and Technology, China and the English major's Chinese students, as participants. The two objectives and research questions were answered by using a mixed design methodology. These different instruments: questionnaire survey organized in four dimensions: *Knowledge*, *Attitudes*, *Skills* and *Awareness*, classroom observation and semi-structured interview were employed to gather data from 184 English major's students who participated in this study using purposive sampling.

The findings revealed that the Chinese students who participated in this study had moderate Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). This implies that all four components of ICC; knowledge, attitudes, skills and awareness were found in the students' English language teaching and learning.

The implication therefore is that, ICC should be inculcated in all levels of teaching and learning activities, as this likely to help students to be confident when communicating with people from different cultural and linguistic background, as this helps them to be familiar with varieties of English spoken by different users in the world.

Keywords: English Language Teaching and Learning, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Intercultural Communication, Multiculturalism, pluralistic ideology

Introduction

Multicultural values stem from the different concept of pluralistic ideology should be the goal of teaching English to strengthen students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Setyono & Widodo, 2019). Speakers of English as second (L2) and foreign languages (FL), are increasing fast in a way that English language dominates the world. English learners, such as the foreign language learners, still face communication challenges. To be competent in English communication is not only about knowing the language but knowing how and when to use it and enable learners to socially use an appropriate language in different context.

In the context of China, English language learning tends to focus on passing the examination and very little about communication. To communicate effectively, a speaker or listener needs to listen and understand the context in order to convey the message efficiently. Such skills mediate interactions between people from different backgrounds, and strive to continue developing communicative skills (Byram, 1997, cited in Lopez-Rocha, 2016, p. 107). However, these important skills tend to be lacking with regards to Chinese students' English learning skills.

This study posed two objectives supported by two different questions:

- 1) What is the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) level of English major students from Chengdu College of University of Electronic Science and Technology, China?
- 2) What are the different components of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) found in English major students' English language classrooms' teaching and learning?

Literature Review

There are many definitions of ICC. Chen and Starosta (1999) define intercultural communicative competence as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute

communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment" (p.28). They argue that ICC consists of three components: intercultural sensitivity (affective process), intercultural awareness (cognitive process) and intercultural adroitness (behavior process), all of which are defined as verbal and nonverbal skills needed to perform effectively and appropriately in different intercultural situations.

Fantini (2000, 2006, 2018) and Fantini & Tirmizi (2006) explain that ICC refers to the ability to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with people who are linguistically and culturally different with each other. Deardorff (2004) thinks that the ability to behave and communicate with individuals from different cultural background effectively and appropriately is necessary (Lazar et al., 2007). This philosophy is used as a guideline for language teachers to focus on the two main components: skills and attitudes. The former involves the development of the skills of *observation, interpreting, relating, mediation* and *discovery*, and the latter is to increase *respect, empathy* and *tolerant* for ambiguity that foster awareness and openness toward people from different cultural background (Banjongjit & Boonmoh, 2018).

Many scholars such as Byram (1997, 2003), Fantini (2000, 2006, 2018) and Gao (2014) have proposed several models of ICC on the basis of their own definition and the claim that various components are included in ICC. Byram (1997) put forward an influential model of ICC in his work. Byram's (1997, 2003, 2009) ICC model consists of *linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence* and *intercultural competence*.

Intercultural competence is composed of four sub-components, *skills, knowledge, attitudes* and *critical cultural awareness*. Within the skills, the two sub-skills are identified as interpreting/ relating skills and discovery/ interaction skills.

Furthermore, there are three types of knowledge. One is the knowledge about social groups in one's domestic culture, another is the knowledge about social groups in other cultures and the last one is knowledge about general interaction process. For attitudes, they include the interlocutors' openness, curiosity, willingness to suspend disbeliefs about other cultures and beliefs about one's own culture. Fantini's (2000, 2009) IC model overlaps with Byram's (1997) intercultural elements, as it includes attitudes, skills, knowledge and awareness. He also stresses that language education should pay more attention to intercultural aspects of language so that learners can develop awareness, attitudes, knowledge and skills that can help them better participate in activities on both local and global level. Gao (2014) draws lessons and absorbs foreign mainstream ICC models. He creatively constructs the theoretical framework of the assessment system of college students' intercultural communicative ability named *Knowing-and-Doing Model*. It enriches the study of intercultural communication in China and promotes the localization of the assessment system of intercultural communicative competence.

The following six categories and their corresponding sub-categories are drawn from Gao's model (2014, p. 87):

- 1) knowledge (surface-culture/ deep-culture knowledge)
- 2) awareness (global-culture/ local-culture/ self-acceptance awareness)
- 3) critical thinking (logic/ deduction); 4) attitudes (openness/ tolerance/ flexibility)
- 5) skills (verbal skills/ nonverbal skills/ interaction/ adaptability)
- 6) strategies (code switching/ cooperation/ empathy strategy).

Zhuang (2006) states that ICC should be the ultimate purpose of ELT, which would be reflected by the realization of effective and appropriate

communication. Because this day world is a globalized world, the need of intercultural competent speakers is exploding.

There are many Chinese scholars focusing on ICC. Zhu (2008) explores the intercultural communication awareness and communication skills of primary school students in English teaching, Song (2011) understands the current situation of high school students' intercultural communicative awareness through tests and interviews, and based on this, proposed the principles of gradual progress, practicality and contrast in intercultural communication teaching. Liu & Xie (2013) conduct an investigation on the ICC of provincial college English majors. The participants are 118 English majors of grade 3 and an intercultural communication test was used to examine their level of ICC based on the data from the study, they get a conclusion that the general level of the English major's students' ICC is low.

However, this study focuses on identifying the overall level of the English major's students and identifying the different components of ICC found in their English language teaching and learning.

Research Methodology

To answer the research question, a mixed-method design was employed using 184 English major's students from CDUESTC employing purposive sampling. This sampling technique can be viewed as a deliberate choice due to members of the target population having met certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, and the willingness to participate in the study (Barratt, Ferris, & Lenton, 2015; Creswell, 2003; Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

The following instruments were used to collect data.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was adopted from Fantini (2016). The questionnaire used in this study was written in English as the participants were English major's students and their English level was relatively higher compared with the students from other majors. The questionnaire consists of two parts. First part covers personal information about the participants while the second part deals with the Assessment of Intercultural (Communicative) Competence (AIC) which consists of 50 items.

The scale inventory consists of four dimensions; knowledge, attitudes, skills and awareness.

Classroom observation questions

The observation was done using the observation checklist and notes. The teaching materials, activities and interactions were observed in order to provide enough data to identify the different components of ICC in teaching and learning.

Semi-structured interview report

The semi-structured interview was used to obtain more in-depth information to identify different components of ICC found in the participants' English language teaching and learning. This was done to 15 English major's students who had answered the questionnaire.

The instrument used to collect the data which was crucial to answer question one (1) was the questionnaire while observation and semi-structured interview were used to answer research question two (2).

Findings and Discussion

The ICC level of the English major's students from CDUESTC

Based on the findings using descriptive analysis the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) level of the student from Chengdu College University of Electronic Science and Technology is MODERATE.

Table 2: The Overall findings of the four dimensions of ICC

Dimensions	Number of Students	Mean	S.D	Interpretation
Knowledge	184	2.94	0.58	Moderate
Attitude	184	3.48	0.68	Moderate
Skills	184	3.18	0.61	Moderate
Awareness	184	3.33	0.56	Moderate
ICC	184	3.25	0.50	Moderate

The table above indicated the overall result of question one. As presented, the highest mean score among the four dimensions is ATTITUDE with $M= 3.48$ and $SD=0.68$, while the lowest mean score is KNOWLEDGE with $M= 2.94$ and $SD=0.58$. This result suggested that among the four dimensions, with regards to ATTITUDE the Chinese students who participated in this study showed **positive attitudes** to other people who come from different cultural background. However, with regards to KNOWLEDGE they still were lacking awareness to be more adept culturally.

The different components of ICC found in CDUESTC English major's students' English language teaching and leaning

The findings of the second question based on the classroom observation, and semi-structured interviews are as follows:

- **Intercultural Competence Knowledge (ICK) in English teaching and learning**

There were different ways where students gain knowledge and skills. These knowledge influences student's awareness and attitudes the way they view other people who come from different linguistic and cultural background. This knowledge in teaching and learning can be found in teaching materials, activities and students' interactions. Information gathered from students' semi-structured interview also help to support the findings of the research question two.

There were nine features of IC knowledge found in students' English lessons namely: Religion, Literature, Family tree, Figurative language, Historical and political knowledge, Language, Media and advertisement, Countries, and Gesture. Based on these features, various aspects of intercultural knowledge were embedded in the English classes which had provided students opportunities to know about people, places, history with regards to culture.

According to Byram (1997, 2003, 2009), intercultural knowledge has two major components: the knowledge of social groups, their products and social practices and the knowledge of general processes of societal and individual interaction. Findings indicated that students' English classes had emphasized in general knowledge about social groups, their products and practices. Students acknowledge that 'knowledge of social groups' was learned from people who they are interacting with. This helps them to be familiar with practices of foreigners living in China.

The extracts of the interviews are given as part of the examples:

S1: *Chinese and Russian culture is quite different as this show through their religion and food, but I feel happy when I talk to them.*

S3: *I travelled to Thailand before and interacted with Thai people. Although we have similarities but their culture is different. For example, the equipment they used in the kitchen is different such as the use of fork and spoon instead of chopsticks like Chinese use.*

S10: *The foreigners I know dare to say and do anything they like, while Chinese people are more cautious in speaking and doing, and dare not show themselves. Foreigners do not hesitate to show their feelings and express themselves openly.*

Knowledge of processes of societal and individual interaction, people from different cultural background, as illustrated in different examples have different communication styles. The knowledge learned and observed are likely to help students to understand other cultures' behaviors. An understanding of the norms and communication rules provide important information which is vital for communication especially if a student is dealing with people who come from different cultural background (Wiseman, Hammer & Nishida, 1989).

- **Intercultural Competence Attitude (ICA) in teaching and learning**

The findings showed that the attitudes to other cultures in teaching and learning seem to be good, as the students' exhibit curiosity to the western world. Based on the data, they showed willingness to know and understand other ways of thinking and saying. Teachers used of videos about other cultures as part of the teaching and learning was an activity where the students learned to show tolerance and understanding. This also aroused their interests to people who have different cultural and educational background. Such activity is likely to demonstrate positive

attitude towards other who are from different cultural background. Although the participants implied that their intercultural communication experience varies, most of them indicated a willingness to communicate with people regardless of their language and culture. This means, they respect and understand others. As Deardorff (2004) states, an increasing respect to people from different cultural background can be used as one of the guidelines for language teachers to cultivate students' ICC.

The extracts of the interview are given to support the statement made.

S2: *I think if some issues we found culturally are not harmful, we should understand and respect their cultures. For example, most Chinese think we should support the old, while western people think that they have their own life. We should respect their culture. Although they do not support the old folk, this does not mean they are not filial.*

S7: *As each country has its own culture, we need to respect that. And if you like it, follow. For example, like Japanese Otaku and Korean pop. If you don't like, just ignore. Don't push others to follow the culture that you like.*

S8: *I'm too shy to talk with foreigners so, I only have Chinese friends. I talk only talk to a foreigner who is my teacher, otherwise no. Talking is difficult to me. My English is so poor and I'm too shy.*

S9: *I have no chance to communicate with foreigners outside the class. Sometimes, foreign teachers may ask me something so I answer his question. Because my English is poor, I cannot answer his question as well, so I feel embarrassed. And I am very hesitant to communicate with foreigners, so I just avoided.*

Being open to others is likely to open new perspective and broaden someone's horizon. This is one of the essences of a person who is culturally adaptable. Being open is likely to lead students' harmonious relationship between cultures. According to Byram, a curious and open attitude is a prerequisite for the development of ICC,

because if there is no desire to learn from or communicate with someone with different beliefs, values and behaviors, there will never be any development in skills or knowledge (Byram, 1997, 2000, 2003).

However, there were few participants who tend to have low confidence because of lacking self-reliance. They also articulated of being anxious when talking to other people especially if they come from different cultural background because of their English spoken ability which tended to be poor.

- **Intercultural Communicative Skills (ICS) in teaching and learning**

Byram (1997, 2003) argues that intercultural (communicative) competence is about “knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one’s self” (p. 34).

The findings illustrated that the two sub-skills of ICC SKILLS are found in their English classroom teaching and learning:

The skills of interpreting and relating: For example, the teacher translated “anecdote” to students, and linked to Chinese anecdotes. Discussion based on different time line between China and Western countries were also part of the lesson. Having discussed these cultural differences, students were asked to reflect and relate. These kinds of lessons allow students to relativize one’s self and value others which include “curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own” (Byram, 1997, p. 91).

The skills of discovery and interaction: The students acquired new knowledge of culture and cultural practices in most lessons during the observations. For example, they learned knowledge about New Zealand in the spoken English class. As their intercultural knowledge, attitudes and skills widen, this allows them to interact with their foreign teachers.

Some extracts from the interview support the findings:

- S2:** *When we communicate with foreigners, we have to know each other and we need to respect each other. This is how we develop this ability is to make friends and know each other more not only in the classroom but also by searching from the internet. Like me when I communicate with others who are not Chinese, I always focus on the differences and similarities and relate to Chinese tradition to help me to understand them better.*
- S4:** *As your country is not the only country in the world, we need to learn more about others. So we can communicate with people from different cultural background, and try to understand their culture from both ours and their perspectives.*

The findings suggest that the students have the ability to interpret and relate their own experience to others. This knowledge of one's self and others means knowledge of the rules for individual and social interaction and consists of knowing social groups and their practices, both in one's culture and the other culture. Such skills also allow the Chinese students to acquire "new knowledge of culture and cultural practices," including the ability to use existing knowledge, attitudes, and skills in cross-cultural interactions (Byram, 2003, p. 98).

Further people who are interculturally skilled possess the ability to acquire different knowledge and able to place it in the real cultural context (Byram, 1997, 2003; Fantini, 2000; Kim, 2001).

- **Intercultural Communicative Awareness (ICA+) in teaching and learning**

Fantini (2000, 2018) points out that awareness helps to develop other components of intercultural communicative competence while it simultaneously benefits and reflects knowledge, attitudes and skills. While Byram (1997, 2000.

2003) describes this as an ability to use perspectives, practices, and products in one's own culture and in other cultures to make evaluations. Therefore, awareness is essential for the improvement of intercultural (communicative) competence. Based on the findings, the cultivation of intercultural awareness was emphasized on critical comparison how people from different cultural background deal with some events and realizing the importance of those practices. For example, in some lessons, the teacher talked about different expressions, different practices such when someone passed away (funeral) or different attitudes and behaviors in appreciating beauty.

These differences indicate that awareness includes a range of communication forms, including verbal and non-verbal modes and the development of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies which are fundamental to intercultural competence.

Some extracts are given as part of examples

- S5:** *Understanding and acknowledging the differences is the premise of being a culturally diverse person because once we understand the differences, effective communication can go on wheels.*
- S9:** *Language is the soul of our culture; it shows the essence of culture. To understand cultural and linguistic differences is equal to respect for a nation or a group of people.*
- S14:** *Because understanding linguistic and cultural differences is the basis of improving integrated language skills and communicative competence. If you can understand the linguistic and cultural differences among people, this promotes communication effectively which is the hallmark of achieving the goal of the communication.*

The four components of ICC were all found in English language teaching and learning such as, in teaching and learning materials, activities, interactions and feedback; for example, knowledge in terms of different religions, language and literature (figurative languages), Western and Asian family tree (ancestry/genealogy) were taught in the English classroom. In addition, cultural, historical and political knowledge of various cultures were also taught. Understanding the different differences have a tendency to promote a sense of appreciating 'others' and 'self' as this enable students to appreciate each other differences thus avoid ethnocentric attitude (Singer, 1987; Barnett and Lee, 2003). According to Abrams (2002), culture learning is more effective if students are involved in finding their traditions and explicitly link those to their own and other cultures. This is supported by the findings in which students indicated that they have knowledge of certain societal processes and individual interaction but as implied due to their lack of exposure with people who come from other cultures and the difficulty of communicating with the English language interaction tends to be difficult for them.

Conclusion

The findings have drawn some pedagogical implications students, EFL teachers (China context) and school administrators. The author has put forward some suggestions for Chinese students and EFL teachers.

Though ICC is not a new area being studied in the context of China, in terms of teaching English, there are still lots of implications that this study can be offered in China English language classroom, for example when it comes to teaching and learning different aspects of culture were studied in the classroom, but the teaching seems superficial as in the context of English language teaching, to foster linguistic competence, learning some formulaic expressions, vocabulary and pronunciations

were not emphasized in the classroom (Setyono & Widodo, 2019). According to Canale (1983), exposure to these aforementioned features foster students' communicative competence as this is essential once opportunity arises in real life situation. Adding more situational tasks for example might be able to promote linguistic competence that would likely influence students discourse competence. Learning tasks that are likely to cultivate students' interactional and intercultural competence should be encouraged. Although, some teaching materials used in the English classroom have interesting intercultural contents, teachers need activities that would arouse students' curiosity with regards to language, for example, activities which encourage students to interact or talk with other students more or activities which allow students to practice common speech acts, such as, expressions of regret, apology, complaint, etc. These speech acts are necessary for students as they need to express their feeling and emotions, for example, role plays, which are vital in real communication and interactions. If teachers will be able to provide students learning activities that provide them opportunities to practice the target language (English) this will likely to enrich students' intercultural experiences in the English classroom settings.

The goal of cultivating the English major's students' ICC is to help them to communicate with people from different cultural background appropriately and effectively. As Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) involves ability to apply linguistic knowledge means being able to interpret and produce language either spoken or written, pedagogically. Therefore, ICC should be inculcated in all levels of teaching and learning activities, such as, reading, writing, speaking and listening. Linguistically, these are likely to help students to be more confident when communicating with people from different cultural background, as this helps them to familiarize how words in English will be used contextually. Furthermore, students need to use tools available to them for example the use of technology. Using technology to communicate with other people who are linguistically, culturally and historically differ from them has a tendency to help students to know

different expressions and responses given, thus, foster conversational or interactional competence among students. Moreover, teachers need to let students understand that a language learning process is not only about the language (English) but everything that goes with it. Hence, students' ability to communicate, interact and convey meaning with people comes with adequate knowledge, attitudes, skills and critical awareness.

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