

Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in Foreign Language Classrooms: A Study of EFL Learners in China

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ARTICLE INFO

History Article:

Accepted: 20-07-2022
Approved: 25-08-2022

Keywords:

*intercultural communicative competence;
explicit instruction;
foreign language education;
EFL learners*

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been accentuated with the wave of globalization. Universities in China have highlighted ICC in language classrooms. Following Byram's (1997) ICC model (including knowledge, skills and attitudes), this study focuses on the efficacy of explicit instruction in developing ICC among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in classrooms in China, and to discover how this development is related to the English proficiency. This research therefore has two purposes: (1) to use a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to assess ICC including questionnaire through self and others after explicit instruction. And (2) to investigate the relationship between the development of ICC and the English proficiency. The results show that (1) explicit instruction is effective in raising students' development of ICC, especially the knowledge and skills, and (2) English proficiency is significantly related to better acquisition of ICC. In order to promote learners' ICC based on the mentioned results, some methods can be adopted: refine the intercultural content, manifest the teaching objectives, improve the involvers' initiatives and implement the scientific evaluation.

Globalization is an unstoppable trend in the international community. Exchange between or among various cultures are more frequent than before. According to Miculek (2015), interculturalism can be conceived as a kind of intercultural dialogue, which is understood as an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic background and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect and particularly involves all school and educational activities; the role played by professionals working in the educational field, such as teachers and educators, is of fundamental importance to favor "coexistence, dialogue, and negotiation" (Szcurek-Boruta, 2018) between members of different groups to reach an agreement about new possibilities to live and think in the same country. In particular, Byram (1997) proposed a comprehensive model, highlighting the specific components of ICC and rendering its teaching and assessment quantifiable. The purposes of this project are twofold: (1) to evaluate the effectiveness of explicit instruction on a group of EFL learners in a university setting and (2) to investigate the relationship between the development of ICC and language proficiency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Communicating effectively in intercultural settings is known as intercultural communication effectiveness or intercultural communication competence. It would seem that one way to define intercultural communication competence places emphasis on the two behaviors of encoding and decoding (Monge, Bachman, Dillard, & Eisenberg, 1982). Or ICC is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures (Spitzberg, 2000).

Murat Hismangolu (2011) has done an investigation of ELT students' ICC in relation to linguistic proficiency, overseas experience and formal instruction. Its results show that the students with higher linguistic proficiency gave more acceptable responses to the communicative situations than those students with lower linguistic proficiency, which is connected with grammatical and pragmatic competence. As for formal education, it helps the participants get a high level of ICC. Some recommendations have been proposed that is incorporated with activities in foreign language classroom, like role play, simulation, cultural comparison, drama, cultural capsules, cultural problem solving, cultural assimilators, cultoons, games, association games, discussion, ethnographic tasks, projects, personalizing activities etc. ICC education should commence at the very beginning of foreign language learning.

Almarza G. G. et al. (2015) profiles the positive attitudes that the group display and the deeply ingrained prejudices these two elements in ICC of university students at the beginning of their Erasmus placements. Following Byram's model, in attitude, skill and knowledge regard, students display a positive attitude toward the host country and they realize the challenge and try to adapt new cultural environments. And students seem to share a willingness to have a better professional prospect and to grow personally regardless of whether their access to an Erasmus placement may be a university requirement, depend on their academic results, or be a personal choice.

Nadeem M. U. (2020) retests the integrated model of ICC on international students from the Asian context of Malaysia. Through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), it shows the relationship between the mediating effect of motivation and sensation seeking, ethnocentrism and proposes the future developing strategies and policies for international students. High sensation seekers are less prone to ethnocentrism in a Malaysian context.

Models of Intercultural Communicative Competence

Byram (1997) proposed a comprehensive framework that includes three components – knowledge, skills, and attitudes, of which knowledge and skills are considered the foundation of ICC. Knowledge is further divided into two categories: (1) knowledge of others and of social processes of social groups and (2) knowledge of self and of critical cultural awareness, which involves an ability to evaluate practices and products of one's own and others' cultures. Skills are divided into two categories: (1) skills to interpret and relate and (2) skills to discover and/or to interact. Finally, attitudes refer to the ability to relativize one's self and to value others with 'curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and about one's own' (Byram, 1997).

ICC Research in China

Setting curriculum about intercultural communication is to cultivate ICC in the direct way (Cheng & Liu, 2016). But at least, there are two points that need to pay attention to: one is that cultural knowledge cannot be regarded as the ICC, and the other is that language is the barrier of culture. Therefore, as the improvement of language efficiency, the ICC will also be improved as well timely. ICC, as the top goal of foreign language teaching and the priority in English as a foreign language teaching, should be integrated into each stage of teaching (Cheng & Liu, 2016). As for its components, Han (2011) demonstrates that it includes communicative abilities and intercultural abilities. Communicative abilities consist of linguistic competence, pragmatic competence and strategic competence while intercultural abilities hold sensitivity, tolerance and flexibility. That is to say, one in a certain context is able to pass, explain and interact with each other with an eye of intercultural cognitive perspective and feels the different behaviours and interaction pattern caused by various cultures. Chinese scholars have been in general agreement with the definition of ICC despite there were some different propositions and statements about it. There are three parts of it, including intercultural knowledge, positive motivation for interaction and efficient skills for interaction. Effectiveness and appropriateness is thought as core principle for ICC. Fu (2018) concludes that intercultural communication in the target language culture is closely connected with cognition and cultural patterns. With the Communicative Method in English classroom teaching, British and American Literature is integral in teaching content. In 2021, Lv demonstrates that attention on aphasia in target language culture should be transferred to aphasia of our mother tongue culture. And bi-directional instruction of target language culture and source language culture should be implemented in foreign language teaching and also for English teaching. Is explicit instruction effective in the ICC development among Chinese EFL learners? Is there a relationship between English proficiency and ICC development?

METHOD

A mixed-method approach with a self-assessment tool (questionnaire) was employed for the purpose of the study. The questionnaire was designed to elicit learners' self-evaluations of their ICC and the relationship between ICC and English proficiency was explored through the questionnaire. A course was offered to English-major or translation-major students in order to equip language learners with ICC through explicit instruction. The course introduced the majored cultural differences among countries and areas with a focus on intercultural communication. And this course is designed through these three objectives: (1) to raise students' awareness of self-identity and personal characteristics, (2) to introduce different communication styles across cultures, and (3) to train intercultural abilities and sensitivity (Huang, 2021). The questionnaire includes two parts. Part 1 contained a series of statements designed on a five-point Likert Scale (totally agree, basically agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). The 24 statements were divided according to the three-dimensional model: knowledge (8 statements), skills (8 statements), and attitudes (8 statements). Part 2 includes a series of situational questions about students' background information including linguistic repertoire, gender, English proficiency, and Chinese traditional cultural knowledge. The questionnaire was in Chinese as it was imperative that the participants were able to complete the questionnaire in their native language to ensure understanding.

RESULTS

The questionnaire was designed with two purposes in mind: (1) to evaluate the effectiveness of explicit instruction on a group of English-major and translation-major students and (2) to investigate the relationship between the ICC and English proficiency. The following reports the results from the questionnaire in two sections: (1) ICC in terms of the ICC dimensions and (2) ICC in relation to English proficiency.

Table 1. Self Evaluation of Intercultural Communication

Category	Questions	Basically agreed (%)
Knowledge	historical and geographical knowledge of English-speaking countries	53.57%
	costume and literature knowledge of English-speaking countries	46.43%
	social norms (such as privacy, morality etc.) of English-speaking countries	42.86%
	religious etiquette of English-speaking countries	32.14%
	political and economic culture of English-speaking countries	46.43%
	non-linguistic communicative knowledge of English-speaking countries	39.29%
	value and lifestyle of English-speaking countries	50.00%
Skill	Chinese culture (including all aspects mentioned above)	64.29%
	During the process of intercultural communication, I can avoid bias and prejudice AMAP.	50.00%
	I can collect information about culture and intercultural communication.	57.14%
	I often use body language such as gestures and other non-linguistic ways	53.57%
	I can avoid to offend others in linguistic and behavior level	39.29%
	I can consultate with others when in misunderstanding to make both of us satisfied	42.86%
	I can use suitable communicative strategies to overcome cultural differences	42.86%
	I can realise the cultural differences to comment objectively	50.00%
	I can realise the potential cultural shock and avoid some topics about privacy	60.71%
	I can withstand the cultural differences such as value, eating habits and taboos etc	50.00%
Attitude	I am interested in cultural differences in value and lifestyle between China and other countries	42.86%
	I am willing to adjust myself to adopt other culture for communication with people from different background	50.00%
	I can cultivate my interest in appreciating and understanding different cultural products	46.43%
	I can understand the joke and humor in different cultures AMAP	46.43%
	I can experience others' emotions and feelings to smooth the communication process at any time.	50.00%
	Few of them will ask their friends to treat them, so I often feel afraid and nervous when they are not enthusiastic as Chinese	39.29%
	I am afraid of making mistakes and being teased when communicating with foreigners	35.71%
I am afraid of that I can't understand what are talked about when communication	42.86%	

In the Table 1, most of participant can acquire the knowledge and skills to interact in their self-evaluation and possess the attitude towards when faced with specific situation on intercultural communication occasions. But in the field of knowledge, 32.14% of them can clearly master the religious etiquette of English-speaking countries and 39.29% can understand non-linguistic communicative knowledge of English-speaking countries. And in the section of skill, only 39.29% can avoid to offend others in linguistic and behavior level. In addition, in the part of attitude, 39.29% feel afraid and nervous when their foreign friends are not enthusiastic as Chinese their friends to treat them and 35.71% are afraid of making mistakes and being teased when communicating with foreigners.

In the questionnaire that studies the relationship of ICC and English proficiency, most of participants choose the right options, except three questions. First, in American society, people always view the personal asset as the main criteria as success. 45.71% of them choose "disagree". Second, Ann is an America and her roommate Li Wei is a Chinese. Ann always asks her friends to party in the dormitory, which brings discomfort to Li. But it's hard for Li to express her own idea to Ann. Suppose that you were Li, would you tell Ann your real feelings directly? 57.14% of them choose "probably". Third, in intercultural communication, could you withstand the differences brought by cultures (such as eating habits)? 68.57% of them choose "it depends on". Students still need more knowledge about religious and practical setting analysis in order to break the gap between people from different cultural background.

Based on all the mentioned above, we can figure out the research questions. For Q1, half the participants have taken part in the intercultural communication lessons and half of them are not. But over 50% of them can judge themselves that they can master most of knowledge, skills and attitude about intercultural communication in the Part 1 of the questionnaire. Therefore, explicit instruction can play a great role in cultivate ICC to some degree. For Q2, 77.14% of participants have obtained their certificate of TEM-4 (Test for English Majors Grade Four) and TEM-8 (Test for English Majors Grade Eight). 22.86% of them have gained the certificate of CET-4 (College English Test Band4) and CET-6 (College English Test Band6). These are the certificates for quantifying their English proficiency in Chinese universities and these tests are held by Department of Education in

China. The higher English proficiency for EFL learners shows more correct choice rate in the questionnaire, indicating the greater development of ICC in the regard of knowledge and skill. However, it still have some room to fill in religions and physical practice.

DISCUSSIONS

To highlight the role of explicit instruction on ICC, especially in classroom teaching. Therefore, there are four aspects to improve the ICC in EFL for instructors and students, namely, refine the intercultural content, manifest the teaching objectives, improve the involvers' initiatives and implement the scientific evaluation.

For educators, they play the anthroponotic role of creating the citizens of tomorrow. Before the classroom instructions, teachers should make sufficient and juiceful preparations, such as adequate knowledge; suitable motivation; trained behaviors/actions. And the teaching objectives can be more specific, which are divided into knowledge, skill and attitude. Now that we have known that language is a form of culture. When it comes to culture teaching, EFL teaching is an inevitable part. Most of students can acquire their native culture from their mother tongue and their environment and accessible resources are all concerned their own culture. Thus, in this paper, English teaching can be equal to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) teaching. One of principles of SLA put forward by Rod Ellis can be applied here, and that is successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input. Ellis and Wells (1980) demonstrated that a substantial portion of the variance in speed of acquisition of children can be accounted for by the amount and the quality of input they receive. Krashen (1981) has adopted a very strong position on the importance of input. He points to studies that have shown that length of residence in the country where the language is spoken is related to language proficiency and other studies that that have found positive correlations between the amount of reading reported and proficiency/literacy. These professionals play a key role in sensitization especially of their students and their parents (who are part of the civil society), in order to counter the emergence, in recent years, of public policies characterized by the fear of foreigners, real or presumed. On the one hand, they should integrate the teaching of ICC in foreign language education as the instruction explicit and implicit input for students. On the other hand, they should provide an alternative and effective tool of assessment for the evaluation of ICC, which can be served as a goal-oriented motivation for students.

For students, as the language learners, they can benefit from explicit instruction based on the presentation, description and analysis of text or video materials, and, furthermore, that they can acquire knowledge about cultures of their own and others, and skills to analyse, evaluate and interpret intercultural interaction. Moreover, they should have self-improvement motivations to develop ICC in such a multicultural world. Ideally, if more resources are available, schools need to establish self-access centres which students can use outside class time. Successful EFL learners seek out opportunities to experience the language outside class time. Many students are unlikely to make the effort unless teachers make resources available and provide learner training. When all the teaching proceufures are finished, instant evaluations and assessments are not not only for teachers, but also for students.

CONCLUSION

This research adopts an intercultural method to English language education and suggests that explicit instruction facilitates the development of ICC. And the higher English proficiency enables students to promote ICC significantly. This research confirmed that language learners can benefit from explicit instruction based on the presentation, description, and analysis of text and video materials. Furthermore, they can acquire knowledge about their native language culture and target language culture, and skills to analyze, evaluate and interpret intercultural interaction (Huang, 2021).

Nevertheless, there are two limitations to the case study. First, the study included a small number of participants, who are enrolled in a selected major group. Consequently, the small sample size of sub-groups limited the ability to extrapolate the findings to a larger group and renders comparison difficult (Brysbaert, 2019). In the future studies, a large number of participants should be concluded instead of the limited group of English majores or the students who major in translation and the results will offer more generalization. Second, the assistance brought by explicit instruction (ICC course) is only evaluate by the participants themselves and English proficiency of participants is only standardized by the certificate of CET4 & 6 (College English Test Band4 and Band6) of non-English majors or TEM4 & 8 of English majors. To address the limitations of self-reports, it is suggested that other assessment measures are used in future studies.

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