SUGGESTIONS ON DEVELOPING CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN NET ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract:

This paper presents an empirical study on Chinese university students' intercultural communication competence. The results show that learners should promote their cultural knowledge, intercultural sensitivity, communication strategies and intercultural awareness, etc. Suggestions for the curriculum and pedagogy of intercultural communication and the methods in developing Chinese university students' intercultural communication competence in net environment are provided based on the research results.

Key words: intercultural communication (IC), intercultural communication competence (ICC), ICC questionnaire survey, course design

1. Introduction

This is both a theoretical and empirical study of how to develop Chinese university students' intercultural communication competence (ICC, for short). It is one of the phased objectives we have attained for a provincial project in China, the title of which is "The Course Design of Intercultural Communication (IC, for short) in Net Environment". This is a case study, in which, we choose Central South University (CSU), a key university in Changsha, Hunan province, China, as the target university and the students in CSU as the experimental subjects.

IC is often defined as communication "between people from different national cultures and many scholars limit it to face-to-face communication" (Gudykunst, 2002:179). The situation in China might be different from this definition – it might not always be

possible for Chinese people to have face-to-face communication with people from different cultures. Yet it is important for Chinese people to have a better understanding of the other cultures.

With the increasing of globalization and integration of economics, IC becomes more and more popular. It requires people to have more ICC. It is the same case in China. University, as a place to cultivate talents, inevitably, should take the responsibility for developing students' ICC. As a result, nowadays, it has become a trend in universities to open a series of IC courses to improve university students' ICC, which ranks as the no. 1 concern for teachers and university students inside and outside the foreign languages teaching field. In *the Requirements for the Teaching of College English courses* (2007), re-revised by Chinese Ministry of Education, the importance of the university students' ICC is pointed out.. At the same time, it stresses the importance of cultivating university students' sensibility and tolerance to cultural differences, dealing with such differences with ease and meeting with the increasingly extensive need of international communication. Therefore, we can find that developing university students' ICC is one of the main directions and ultimate goals for college English teaching, which can meet the urgent demands for talents in nowadays society. It has triggered the probing interests of teachers for the teaching of IC.

Research in ICC is of academic and pragmatic interest to many scholars due to the relevance of the subject in today's culturally diverse society. (Arasaratham, 2007b). Historically speaking, western scholars have done a lot of research on ICC (Ruben 1976, 1977, 1978, 1989; Kim 1986, 1991; Yum 1988; Collier 1989; Gudykunst 1993, 1995; Spitzberg 1997; Fox 1997; Van de Vijver & Leung 1997; Smith 1999; Stephan, Stephan & Gudykunst 1999; Yoshitake 2002; Arasaranam 2007a). Compared with the study in the west, the IC study in China starts quite late. But recently, it develops very fast. According to an incomplete statistics, since the beginning of 1980s, more than 30 monographs and textbooks on IC have been published and more than 2000 articles have been published (Wenzhong Hu, 2005). Despite the abundance in the study of IC and despite the fact that recently, the study in this field has touched upon the aspect of the development of ICC, there still lacks deep study on ICC. (Shiyong Peng, 2005).

This article analyzes the university students' present situation of ICC by the means of

literature study and empirical study, puts forward suggestions on how to develop Chinese university students' ICC in net environment. The research questions for this study are (1): What is the level of current Chinese university students' ICC? (2): How to improve their ICC in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context?

2. The Definitions for Terms

The most important term in this article is ICC, which includes three important elementary concepts: culture, communication and competence.

Culture can be defined from two points of view. From pragmatic point of view, culture refers to "the way we do things around here". The other is from academic point of view, which means "a shared system of assumptions, values and beliefs of a people which result in characteristic behaviors". (Utley, 2011[2004]) Anyone lives under a certain kind of culture. It is the ways in which we have learned to see and think about communication.

Communication, according to Gudykunst and Kim (2002), includes a lot of assumptions, such as: "communication is a process involving the encoding and decoding of messages", "communication takes place at varying levels of awareness", "every communication message has a content dimension and a relationship dimension", etc. That is to say, our culture makes us have a set of expectations to the way how people should act and react when we communicate with them. When one is in his own country, there is no exception to those expectations, but when one is placed in a foreign environment, he might find his expectation might not be met with.

Then we come to the term competence. This term was first put forward by Chomsky in his distinction between competence and performance. The former refers to an ideal language user's knowledge on language. Then in language teaching, there is the distinction between linguistic competence and communicative competence. Linguistic competence refers to the ability to produce and interpret meaningful utterances which are formed in accordance with the rules of the language concerned and bear their conventional meaning. (Byram, 1997:10) The concept 'communicative competence' was developed by Hymes, who used this concept to criticize Chomsky for his treating of language. Hymes argued that in understanding first language acquisition, one need to pay attention to not only grammatical

competence (linguistic competence), but also the ability to use language appropriately. (Byram, 1997:7) Both linguistic competence and communicative competence are viewed from the first language acquisition point of view. Besides linguistic competence and communicative competence, we have intercultural competence, which, according to Ruben (1976), includes seven dimensions, namely, display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, self-oriented role behavior, interaction management, and tolerance for ambiguity.

Things are quite different when more than one language and more than one culture are involved in communication. That is the case in foreign language teaching, as it for sure concerns with both your own culture, language and the culture and language of foreign countries. Therefore, the major aim for foreign language teaching is to develop the students' ICC.

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) refers to the ability which enables a person to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language. "They are able to negotiate a mode of communication and interaction which is satisfactory to them and the other and they are able to act as a mediator between people of different cultural origins." (Byram, 1997: 71)

Different scholars hold different opinions on the inclusion elements of ICC. Here in this article, we agree with American scholar Lustig and Koester's (2007) opinion that divides ICC into three basic elements, namely, knowledge, motivation and action and three levels of competence, namely, cognition, emotion (attitude) and behavior (Hu, 2013). Specifically, in the cognitive level, the communicator needs to obtain the knowledge of both his own country's and other country's in politics, economics, geography, history, humanity, religion, customs, etc. In the emotional level, the communicator should be sensitive to cultural differences, tolerant to various kinds of cultures, have deep understanding of one's own culture and respect other cultures. The ICC in behavior level refers to the linguistic competence, non-linguistic competence, flexibility competence, the competence to deal with interpersonal relationship, psychological adjustment competence, the competence to adapt to environment and the competence of doing things in alien culture. (Hu, 2013:5) In Europe, *the Common Reference Frame for European Languages* of the European Union takes Byram's

definition for ICC (see the above), which includes four elements, namely, knowledge, skills, attitude and value, learning competence(1995) and judgment competence (1997). Byram's mode includes the three aspect elements put forward by American scholars (knowledge, motivation and action). But in the aspect of competence, it adds learning competence and judgment competence.

As for the scholars' divergence between IC and ICC, professor Hu adopts and support Yang Ying and Zhuang Enping's opinion, which equalizes the two competences and regard them as the same kind of competence. In this way, it can 'promote people in emancipating their ideas from the narrow vision. In the course of developing students' ICC, not only can linguistic communicative competence be made attention to, but also can the importance of intercultural awareness, thinking competence, non-linguistic communication and communicative strategies be stressed." (Yang & Zhuang, 2007:16)

Here in this paper we agree with the opinions of professors Hu, Yang & Zhuang. We hold both IC and ICC as the same kind of concept. At the same time, we adopt Byram's ICC dimension, which is regarded as the major reference frame for the analyzing and fostering of ICC and the setting up of ICC courses.

3. A Summary of the Cultivation Means for Intercultural Communication Competence

In the aspect of teaching method, the intercultural training researcher Gudykunst and Hammer (1983) put forward the combination method of knowledge imparting method and experience exploration teaching method. The former method helps students to grasp language and cultural knowledge by means of lectures and debates, and in the mean time, analyze and understand the culture differences. The latter method can promote students' attitude and performance competence through real or simulated situation, such as role playing, simulation activity and visit, etc. Hongling Zhang (2007) summarized three different kinds of teaching methods: (1) the cultural teaching methods (lecture, case analysis, cultural contrast, theme discussion, scenario simulation), (2) the combination of cultural teaching and foreign languages teaching method (the integration of culture into the analysis of literature works, the teaching of vocabulary, reading, listening, oral English and writing), (3) participant observation method (the experience, interview and analysis in the target language). Besides,

Zhang suggested the fostering of intercultural awareness and sensibility should contrast the development mode of intercultural sensibility put forward by Bennett (1998), i.e., the transformation of the language learners' stages from escape, resist, reduction of cultural differences to adaptation, replying to cultural differences, and therefore, fulfilling the transition from ethnocentric stage to ethno-relative stage. At the same time, Zhang stressed the importance of cultural study method, which refers to the method which can foster the competence of analyzing and explaining cultural phenomena and having introspection of self study process.

Hu (2013) put forward the relevant cultivation means from three aspects, namely, cognition, emotion and competence. He suggested that the ICC in cognition aspect should mainly be obtained from lecture giving, reading, video and website. The ICC in emotional aspect should be obtained from case analysis, field experience, etc. In ability aspect, the linguistic competence can be obtained from the classroom teaching, but some other competence should be fostered in the practical work and life. That is to say, in the teaching of IC, teachers can foster the students' cognitive competence by resorting to textbooks, video and website materials, promote their attitude by case analysis and improve their linguistic competence.. The fostering of other competence could only be gained from extracurricular activities.

Based on the cultivation means and the mode put forward by intercultural communication researchers, we plan to probe into the problems that Chinese university students will face in the course of IC process, make use of the advancing–with-the-time's teaching resources, means and methods, put forward appropriate teaching plan by making use of empirical research method.

4. The Current Situation of the University Students' ICC

In order to investigate the current situation of the university students' ICC, Weiwei Fan, Weiping Wu and Renzhong Peng (2013) designed the self-assessment scale on Chinese university students' ICC, which is based on Byram's multi-dimensions model of IC (including the dimensions of knowledge, skill, awareness and attitude) and the self-assessment questionnaire on IC compiled by Fantini (2000,2006). The scale includes 40

descriptive items, which adopts a five-point Likert scale to keep the score successively from "0" (no) to "5" (very strong / very much). Fan, etc. (2014) made an investigation of more than 1000 university students by applying to such scale, from which they got 1050 effective questionnaires back and did data analysis. At the same time, they also randomly chose 20 students to do interview. The results of their study shows the following features of university students in ICC: (1) generally the Chinese university students are lack of culture knowledge of foreign countries; (2) they won't voluntarily adjust their behavior to adapt to foreigners; (3) They are quite short of communicative competence in foreign languages; (4) They don't know the foreigners' opinion on them and the reasons why there are prejudice.

The investigation objects for Fan, etc. include the university students from the first year to the fourth year. However, in college English teaching, the teaching objects for IC courses are mainly the second year students.

In order to get the relevant information, we adopt the five-point Likert evaluation scale for Chinese students' IC in different dimensions, designed by Fan. [1]We randomly chose 202 second year students from 22 different majors in Central South University and did questionnaire investigation. We took back 199 effective questionnaires, among which, there were 99 students who had passed CET-4,[2]80 students who had passed CET-6, 20 students who hadn't passed CET-4 and 13 students who had oversea experiences.

The following 4 tables reflect the results of the mean value.

Table 1: CSU students' self-assessment table for intercultural knowledge (with 199 samples)

	Kn1	Kn2	Kn3	Kn4	Kn5	Kn6	Kn7	Kn8	Kn9	Kn10
Mean value	3.31	3.53	3.04	*2.53	*2.58	*2.39	*2.16	*2.70	*2.52	*2.33
Variance	0.64	0.67	0.81	0.92	0.71	0.85	0.80	0.82	0.83	0.86

Table 2: CSU students' self-assessment table for intercultural attitude (with 199 samples)

	At1	At2	At3	At4	At5	At6	At7	At8
Mean value	3.76	3.94	4.01	3.99	3.59	3.89	3.84	3.96
variance	1.06	0.93	0.91	0.89	0.83	0.85	0.89	0.86

Table 3: CSU students' self-assessment table for intercultural skills (with 191 samples)

	Sk1	Sk2	Sk3	Sk4	Sk5	Sk6	Sk7	Sk8	Sk9	Sk10	Sk11	Sk12
Mean value	3.59	3.74	*2.31	3.64	3.60	3.60	3.50	*2.72	*2.98	*2.75	3.18	3.22
Variance	1.15	0.89	1.20	1.05	0.98	1.01	1.08	1.12	0.93	0.96	0.89	1.03

Table 4: CSU students' self-assessment table for awareness (with 191 samples)

	Aw1	Aw2	Aw3	Aw4	Aw5	Aw6	Aw7	Aw8	Aw9	Aw10
Mean value	3.66	3.62	3.41	3.40	3.50	3.16	3.55	3.06	3.38	3.28
variance	0.85	0.81	0.88	0.82	1.19	1.00	0.90	0.95	0.88	0.77

We can get these investigation results: (1) In the aspect of cognition, generally, the second year students lack understanding of the western cultural religion, taboos, everyday life social intercourse, value, cultural differences and intercultural communicative strategies and skills (mean value＜3). (2) In the aspect of skills, students are seriously short of linguistic competence, the sensibility to cultural differences and the competence in language and

culture study. (mean value＜3). (3) In the aspects of awareness and knowledge, students rank normally ((mean value＞3), which means that students' level of IC is still at a relatively quite low level, which can not be neglected in teaching. In short, our result is similar to Fan's, which shows that the result of questionnaire investigation is typical and it can objectively represent the current situation of Chinese university students' IC level. There is still a long way to go in developing ICC, which should be the focus of Chinese college English teaching.

5. Suggestions on Developing University Students' ICC in Net Environment

The investigation result shows that Chinese university students' ICC needs to be improved. Recently, Chinese college English education starts to stress on the development of students' ICC. Under such an environment, a lot of general teaching textbooks have been published. But, after an analysis of the content for the recently-published textbooks, we found there exist a series of problems: some theories and communication examples in the textbook of IC are totally copied from the foreign textbooks; some quoted examples are too old-fashioned and they come apart from the reality; although the emphasis of the textbook include introduction to theory, case analysis and contrast of cultural differences, yet such contents as culture and language learning competece, critical reflective competence, communicative strategies and strategic cultivation are seldom touched upon; some textbooks provide for rich practical cases of IC, yet there are too little introduction of theoretical knowledge on IC; although there presents and analyzes the misunderstanding in IC, yet it is short of a deep-level analysis of the relevant cultural phenomena; at the same time, when there appears misunderstanding in IC, there is no concern of how to negotiate with the other side, how to explain one's indigenous culture, how to adopt an appropriate expression to satisfy both sides.

Here are the suggestions we have for developing university students' ICC, especially under nowadays' situation, i.e. we have a wide used net environment. These suggestions will be considered from the perspective of the constituents of ICC, i.e. knowledge, attitude & awareness, and behavior & skill.

Firstly, in the knowledge level, we propose wide reading for the obtaining of culture knowledge and IC knowledge. As for the reading materials, not only can we read mass

publications, but also we can get access to wide range of internet readings. At the same time, we can improve the university students' ICC by opening various kinds of courses. For example, In the Chinese-western culture, we can open the course – Special subjects in Chinese and western cultures, to help students to understand and analyze the surface culture (like life style) and the deep culture (like religion, value, etc.). In the aspect of linguistic knowledge, including speech sounds, vocabulary and sentence structure, we can open the course like English dialects, etymology, lexicology, English Chinese translation respectively. English dialects can make students be familiar with the common variants (such as American English, British English, Indian English, Singapore English, African English, etc), like their different ways of pronunciation. Etymology and lexicology (in which, the explanation of roots and stems constitutes an important part of the course) can promote students' vocabulary study, in which culture plays an important role in the explanation of the source, formation and meaning of the words. By the course English Chinese translation, students can acquire syntactic knowledge and the differences between English and Chinese. Besides these, in the teaching of basic English, we can blend the relevant culture knowledge and language knowledge with the language skills (like Audio-Visual skills and reading, writing & translating skills) in the course of teaching. We can provide references, websites for the students and guide them to search, choose, organize and dispose information, which is gained from the materials in textbooks, websites and media.

Secondly, in the attitude and awareness level, we propose the elimination of ethnocentrism and the conducting of ectopic thinking and the accepting of alien cultures. The elimination of ethnocentrism means that one should not evaluate the foreign cultures with his own culture and standard. On the contrary, one should think from the other's side, i.e., conducting ectopic thinking, by making use of case analysis, scenario simulation, debate, interview and giving questionnaires to oversea students. In this way, university students can accept alien culture. But, at the same time, we should be aware of our unique culture identity. We should foster our confidence in culture and our cultivation in national study. In the course of IC, we should extend our excellent traditional culture and ideology, striving for the right of having equal dialogue with foreigners, rather than compromising and discarding (our own culture).

Thirdly, in the behavior and skill level, not only should students have language competence and culture competence, but also they should have the competence for language and culture, communication strategies and skills and the competence for solving problems. All these competence can be practiced and reflected in the teaching and learning activities. By the means of teaching, we should not only go on the traditional classroom teaching (including lectures, debates, etc.) but also should we make full use of the web environment to develop the students' self-study ability by resorting to some new teaching methods like MOOC, Flipped classroom, etc. We can teach ICC courses by first letting students do self-study, then let them come to classroom to have group discussion, PPT presentation. In this way, students' subjective initiative can be aroused. The students can make full use of the resources in network laboratory to improve their learning ability, to find problems voluntarily and then, teachers' guidance to solve the problems will enhance the students' ICC. We suggest that cultural knowledge and ICC theory should be integrated in the EFL curriculum and textbooks. In the class, teachers are suggested to use case analysis, role-play, discussion and debates. They are also encouraged to use online resources, such as MOOC courses, ICC websites, journal articles, Wechat and chat rooms for exploring and reflecting on these issues, so they will be prepared for effective international communication in the future.

6. Conclusion

The developing of ICC is a gradual process. Not only should we impart the knowledge of culture difference, develop students' critical thinking, guide them in promoting language and communication competence, but also we should help them to develop their own learning competence , the communicative strategies and the adaptability competence. Through this study, we found Chinese university students still need to make great improvement in the aspects of knowledge, attitude, skill and awareness of ICC. Although recently, the IC study has been concerned with fostering ICC in foreign language teaching, yet the study of the training mode is still at its initial stage. We suggest the course design for "IC in college English" be organized according to the theoretical framework of Byram. In the course of teaching, we should combine research and teaching, conducting need analysis according to the result of empirical study. In teaching methods, we should also make

improvement, keeping pace with the time. We should propel and deepen the reform of college English to meet the demand of job market and international communication.

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① We have mentioned in the previous part that: this assessment was originally proposed by Byram (1997) and Fantini (2000, 2006), then combined and modified by Fan, Wu & Peng (2013).
② CET-4 is an exam purposed for the non-major students. Usually it was taken when the students are in second year's study.

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