Cultivating Intercultural Communication Competence under Chinese Higher Vocational College EFL Teaching Context

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Abstract

With burgeoning research on language and language teaching, people have obtained a better understanding of the relationship between language and culture, especially in the context of EFL teaching and learning. This paper presents a discussion on intercultural communication skills in Chinese higher vocational college English teaching. Through the questionnaires and interviews with Chinese teachers and students, the authors identify the blocking factors in the acquisition of intercultural communication competence among students, which include teaching methods, teaching materials and teachers' attitudes towards intercultural communication. It concludes with implications for EFL teaching at higher vocational colleges in China. The authors of the paper hope to enlighten the need for Chinese English teachers to attach more importance on cultivating their students' intercultural communication competence in EFL teaching.

Introduction

Since Hymes (1972, see Xu Li-sheng, 2000) proposed the concept of communicative competence, Chinese and foreign scholars (Ruben, 1976; lmahori & Laniga, 1989; Gudykunst, 1997; Kim, 1992; Spitzberg, 1994; Lam Tai-chun, 1996; Jia Xin, 1997; Hu Wenzhong & Gao Yihong, 1997; Xu Lisheng, 2000; Gao Yongchen, 2005) have not stopped the discussion on communicative competence , especially cross-cultural communicative competence (intercultural). Communicative competence in general has been characterized as communication behavior that is both effective and appropriate (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). A competent communicator is effective in one's ability to achieve one's goals, and appropriate in one's ability to exhibit behaviour that is accepted as well as expected in a given situation. Needless to say, expected and accepted behaviour depends on cultural/relational context, and therefore these factors have to be taken into consideration when extending this definition of communication competence to intercultural contexts. In previous research, there is a general consensus that intercultural communication competence (ICC) can be characterized in terms of three dimensions, namely cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Cui & Van den Berg, 1991; Sercu, 2004; Spitzberg, 1991). Attempts at measuring ICC have usually revolved around these dimensions, with a few other variations.

One of the earlier measures of ICC evident in literature is Ruben's (1976) Intercultural Behavioral Assessment indices. The instrument is designed to evaluate a participant on seven dimensions, namely tolerance of ambiguity, interaction management, display of respect, orientation to knowledge, relational role behavior, interaction posture, and empathy. This instrument has been successfully used in past studies (Chen, 1989; Ruben & Kealey, 1979), but has not been extensively used in recent years. Further, the applicability of this instrument to participants from multiple cultural backgrounds is not clear.

Another instrument in use is the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (Bennett & Hammer 1998), constructed based on Bennett's (1986, 1993) theoretical framework of a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. The instrument is primarily designed to measure intercultural sensitivity, defined, "the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences" (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003, p.422). The authors argue that one's intercultural sensitivity is indicative of one's potential for intercultural competence. The inventory has been used in empirical studies (Greenholtz, 2000). There needs to be, however, more research on establishing the extent to which intercultural sensitivity is a predictor of ICC. Additionally, though intercultural sensitivity may be a predictor of ICC, it is conceptually different from ICC.

The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2000; van der Zee, Zaal, & Piekstra, 2003) evaluates a person on five dimensions, namely, cultural empathy, emotional stability, open-mindedness, flexibility, and social initiative. Though the instrument has been successfully used in empirical studies (van Oudenhoeven & van der Zee, 2002); van Oudenhoven, Mol, & van der Zee, 2003; van der Zee & Brinkmann, 2004) and has proved to be stable across different cultures (Leone et.al., 2005), the measure is primarily a psychometric instrument designed to evaluate multicultural orientation and adaptability, and does not necessarily address the communication aspect of intercultural competence.

Overall, the above studies attempt at measuring ICC and the insights gained from the studies reviewed above are invaluable, but they also suffer a certain weakness. The studies did not follow a common theoretical framework, and most of the studies were mainly based on multiple cultural backgrounds.

It is now widely accepted that the aim of foreign language learning is to acquire the ability to perform a repertoire of cross-cultural acts (Hu Zhuanglin, 2001) and the desired purpose of foreign language teaching is to cultivate the learners' intercultural communication competence. In other words, the acquisition and mediation of effective intercultural communication skills is a new objective in modern language learning and teaching. Since language is inextricably tied to culture while culture is an inevitable element in language understanding, To carry out the research on intercultural communication skills in Chinese higher vocational college English teaching, three research questions are put forward. These are:

1. What kind of situations is the intercultural communication competence of
   Chinese higher vocational college students in?
2. What are the main blocking factors affecting the cultivation of their intercultural competence?
3. How can Chinese students effectively strengthen their intercultural communication competence with in-depth reform of EFL teaching?

With these questions in mind, the authors conducted a study on Chinese vocational college students' intercultural communication competence using the results of a questionnaire amongst 234 non-English majors and 32 EFL teachers. On the basis of the data collected from interviewing teachers and students, the authors of the paper analyze the factors affecting Chinese vocational college students' intercultural communication competence and provide some guidance for EFL cultural teaching in Chinese higher vocational colleges.

Methods

Participants

The participants of the study are 234 students and 32 English teachers from a higher vocational college in China. The students in the higher vocational college are randomly selected from 8 different classes in 3 different grades with 8 different non-English majors in Accounting, Logistics, Marketing, E-commerce, Laws, Software Technology, Computer Application as well as Computer Control. They have studied English for more than 8 years and a total of 266 participated in this study. Incompletely answered questionnaires were discarded. As a result, 263 respondents (among students 231, teachers 32) (98% of 266 cases) were used as the basis for data analysis.

Of the 266 subjects, 65.1% are males, and 34.9% are females. The age/grade distribution of the subjects is almost even, around 33% of each grade.

Instrument

ensure the study's reliability, the authors collected data based on the two forms: the questionnaires on 32 English teachers and 234 Chinese English learners and the interviews with 10 English teachers and 24 EFL learners, who were chosen amongst 32 English teachers and 234 Chinese English learners. The questionnaires and the interviews aimed at the analysis of the students and the teachers' attitudes towards the cultivation of EFL learners' intercultural competence. The interview questions on the students vary a little from those on teachers. Through interviews with teachers and students, we can better understand their attitudes towards EFL learners' intercultural communication, identify the blocking factors affecting EFL learners' intercultural communication competence, and explore possible ways and means to solve.

The questionnaires and the interviews employed in this study were developed by the researchers based on the studies by Gao Yongcheng (2006) and Pan Shuai (2007). The questionnaires employed in the study are 9 multiple-choice written questions. There are five open questions in the interview with the teachers and seven open questions in the interview with the students. The questionnaires are conducted mainly based on motivation of EFL learners' learning English, the competence EFL learners should have, content as well as added content teachers teach in class, teaching methods teachers commonly employ, and main reasons students have difficulty in communicating with foreigners, psychological factors affecting EFL learners' intercultural communication competence, mastery of western communication practices, main obstacles EFL learners meet while communicating with foreigners and main ways and means to enhancing EFL learners' intercultural communication competence..

Data analysis

The responses of each individual respondent were encoded using computers. Descriptive statistics were used to describe and compare responses of the subjects. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were reported in order to understand the EFL learners' intercultural communication competence.

Results

Findings from the nine tables concerning the questionnaires on students and teachers are as follows:

Table 1
Motivation of EFL Learners' Learning English

Type Description	Total cases		Subcases		Percentage （%）	
	students	teachers	students	teachers	students	teachers
A. Communication with foreigners	231	32	49	7	21.35%	23.15%
B. Getting a Diploma & Finding a good job			182	25	78.65%	76.85%

Table 2
Competence EFL Learners Should Have

Type Description	Total cases		Subcases		Percentage （%）	
	students	teachers	students	teachers	students	teachers
A. Intercultural communication competence	231	32	19	3	9.14%	10.39%
B. Listening &speaking Skills			161	22	68.94%	67.26%
C. Mastery of grammar			51	7	21.92%	22.35%

Table 3
Content as well as Added Content Teachers Teach in class

Type Description	Total cases		Subcases		Percentage （%）	
	students	teachers	students	teachers	students	teachers
A. Vocabulary, text, dialogue, sentence patterns, grammar	231	32	31	23	13.46%	69.56%
B. Text background knowledge, listening material			182	6	78.67%	17.97%
C. Western customs, manners, and other cultural background			18	3	7.87%	12.47%

Table 4
Teaching Methods Teachers Commonly Employ

Type Description	Total cases		Subcases		Percentage （%）	
	students	teachers	students	teachers	students	teachers
A. The communicative language teaching	231	32	34	4	14.79%	15.68%
B. The traditional grammar-translation method			197	28	85.21%	84.32%

Table 5
Mastery of Western Communication Practices

Type Description	Total cases		Subcases		Percentage （%）	
	students	teachers	students	teachers	students	teachers
A. Very good			12	3	5.34%	10.56%
B. Medium	231	32	28	5	11.98%	15.76%
C. Good			36	9	15.57%	28.23%
D. Bad			155	15	67.11%	45.45%

Table 6
Main Reasons Students Have Difficulty in Communicating with Foreigners

Type Description	Total cases		Subcases		Percentage （%)	
	students	teachers	students	teachers	students	teachers
A. The traditional teaching methods			50	14	21.65%	43.75%
B. Inappropriate teachers	231	32	9	1	3.76%	3.13%
C. Lack of intercultural communication atmosphere			149	12	64.50%	37.50.%
D. EFL learners			23	5	10.12%	15.62%

Table 7
Psychological Factors Affecting EFL learners' intercultural communication Competence

Type Description	Total cases		Subcases		Percentage （%)	
	students	teachers	students	teachers	students	teachers
A. Being afraid of making mistakes			125	15	54.31%	49.35%
B. Lack of self-confidence and courage	231	32	58	9	24.93%	25.76%
C. Inferiority			48	8	20.76%	24.89%

Table 8
Main Obstacles EFL learners Meet while Communicating with Foreigners

Type Description	Total cases		Subcases		Percentage （%)	
	students	teachers	students	teachers	students	teachers
A. Chinglish, lack of the sense of thinking in English, cultural differences	231	32	85	7	36.78%	21.87%
B. Poor listening and oral English and Lack of enough vocabulary			146	25	63.22%	78.13%

Table 9
Main ways and means to Enhancing EFL Learners' intercultural Communication Competence

Type Description	Total cases		Subcases		Percentage (%)	
	students	teachers	students	teachers	students	teachers
A. Studying abroad	231	32	62	4	26.84%	12.50%
B. Teaching culture in class			40	5	17.31%	15.62%
C. Self-study			15	19	6.49%	59.38%
D. Having foreign teachers			114	4	49.36%	12.50%

From the tables above, the researcher finds that EFL teachers pay little attention to the cultivation of EFL learners' intercultural communication competence and EFL learners don't care about intercultural communication competence. Most of EFL learners learn English so as to find a job instead of communicating with foreigners. Most of them hold they can't master western practice because of the EFL teachers' teaching method and the teaching materials. They believe the reasons why they have difficulty in communicating with the foreigners are that they lack intercultural communication atmosphere and self-confidence and courage and they are afraid of making mistakes. They hope they can enhance their intercultural communication competence by studying abroad, having foreign teachers and EFL teachers introducing cultural differences instead of self-study.

From the results above, most of the EFL teachers' answers are similar to the EFL learners', which also shows the EFL teachers attach little importance to the cultivation of EFL learners' intercultural communication competence. However, the idea on the main ways and means to enhancing EFL learners' intercultural communication competence between teachers and students are different. Most of the teachers hold students can improve their intercultural communication competence through self-study instead of studying abroad, teaching culture in class as well as having foreign teachers.

Analysis on the Interviews with EFL learners

Numerical analysis then appears to be helpful in understanding EFL learners' intercultural competence. However, the qualitative analysis drawn from interviewing the individual L2 learner' attitudes towards intercultural competence can be also revealing. The main content of interviews with the EFL learners are: the input channels of EFL language cultures, the actual state of EFL language teaching and cultural input and EFL learners' attitudes towards intercultural communication.

The results show that most EFL learners have fewer opportunities to contact with foreign cultures. First of all, 24 students, only five individuals has communicated with foreigners before, but it was less than 40 minutes, and two students at the junior high school had foreign teachers, which to some extent, increased the contact with foreign cultures, but they often felt nervous to communicate with foreigners. Although a number of foreign films are exposed to EFL learners, however, owing to lack of guiding, EFL learners tend to only remember the plot, and do not see the cultural factors embodied in the plot. EFL learners lack intercultural communication practices and experience. In addition,

Students felt in the classroom teaching, teachers and teaching materials can not meet the needs of their cultural learning. Many teachers themselves know little about foreign cultures, so they can not teach EFL learners cultural background knowledge in EFL teaching. On the other hand, EFL learners demonstrated a positive, enthusiastic attitude towards cultural learning. They believe that cultural knowledge is more interesting than language points and they are willing to develop their intercultural communication competence.

Analysis on the Interviews with EFL Teachers

After interviewing EFL learners, the researcher interviewed 10 EFL teachers. They are the teachers of different ages, the oldest one is 54 years old, the youngest is 28 years old. In general, the ten teachers can be representatives of Chinese higher vocational college teachers. When asked " In your teaching, do you focus on cultural differences in the teaching materials and consciously cultivate EFL learners' intercultural communication competence? ", a lot of teachers had a similar answer: " Because EFL learners' intercultural communication competence tests are not required, it's unnecessary for us to teach intercultural knowledge. What's worse, it would affect the process of teaching." Only two young teachers paid a little attention to the cultivation of EFL learners' intercultural communication awareness, but did not attach great importance to it. There are three teachers saying that they also knew what the function of language and the purpose to learn a language were? But in reality, they are not allowed to do so, because the teaching tasks are packed in each lesson. There are four teachers stressed it was even more difficult to achieve this goal, and never considered it as a teaching content. Their reasons are as follows: it's difficult for EFL learners to grasp English words and basic grammar and structure, and it's impossible for EFL learners to have a lot of time to improve their intercultural communication competence. However, many of the teachers in the study have shown great interest in cultivating EFL learners' intercultural communication competence, and they have made many valuable ideas and suggestions and hope to attract the attention of the people concerned so as to promote the reform of the existing examination system and develop English innovation in teaching methods and content.

Discussions

The main factors affecting the cultivation of Chinese higher vocational college EFL learners' intercultural communication competence may be teachers, teaching materials and examination system ,which was also concluded in Pan Shuai's research in 2007.
   The above results of the questionnaires and interviews show that teachers pay little attention to cultivate EFL learners' intercultural communication competence.
   In the questionnaire on teachers, a very small number of teachers chose the students should have communication competence, and few teachers believed it was because of EFL learners' less exposure to Western culture, language differences as well as Chinese influence that EFL learners had difficulty in communicating with foreigners.
   The teachers disapprove EFL learners can't communicate with foreigners due to Chinglish, no sense of thinking in English and cultural differences, which shows that many teachers are still teaching language points according to the syllabus as well as the teaching materials.

The ultimate goal of EFL teaching in Chinese higher vocational colleges is to cultivate EFL learners' comprehensive competence such as listening, speaking, reading and writing skills as well as intercultural communication competence. The teaching materials should be helpful in this regard. However, in spite of an increase in content and cultural background knowledge, the teaching material lacks the systematic arrangement, which affects the improvement of EFL learners' intercultural communication competence.

At present, in the majority of English examination papers in Chinese higher vocational colleges, grammar and structure knowledge and reading comprehension tests are the most important, 100 points of which, grammar and structure and reading comprehension test scores are more than 80%. This is contrary to the required examination standards by the communicative approach. Since the syllabus and teaching materials in Chinese higher vocational colleges do not explicitly require cultivating EFL learners' intercultural communication competence, teachers attach great importance to grammar and structure and reading comprehension test based on the outline of the requirements. Furthermore, the tests are much simpler and ignore intercultural background knowledge test, which will make the teacher neglect the cultivation of EFL learners' intercultural communication competence.

The Basic Countermeasures are Necessary for Improving EFL Learners' Intercultural Communication Competence

The English teachers play a vita role in cultivating and improving EFL learners' communication competence. Only teachers with strong intercultural communication competence can effectively cultivate EFL learners' intercultural communication. Teachers without a higher intercultural communication competence and intercultural awareness are bound to lead students to the lack of intercultural communication competence. The teachers' intercultural communication competence can be improved by going abroad for training, attending cultural lectures, theory seminars, academic exchanges and other means to build a high level of intercultural communication levels（GaoYongcheng, 2006）.

A comprehensive reform and innovation for the content of the college English teaching must be carried out to cultivate EFL learners' intercultural communication competence, which is a systematic project, including the teaching philosophy, teaching models, teaching methods, teaching art, teaching evaluation mechanism and so on.

A series of major transformation should be conducted. A teacher-centered, examination-based teaching should be transformed to student-centered and   improving EFL learners' intercultural communication competence-based teaching. A reading comprehension-based teaching should be shifted to engage in the actual intercultural communication in listening and speaking. The EFL teachers should take advantages of the computer (network) and educational software. The personalized as well as active learning model should be employed in EFL teaching and learning. The evaluation mechanism should be transformed from the original assessment on grammar, reading comprehension to the evaluation of EFL learners' listening and speaking and using English competence, which gradually shifts the original results of a single evaluation of teaching to the overall monitoring and evaluation of the entire teaching process.

In Chinese higher vocational college English teaching, due to the impact of unified teaching methods, teachers often overlook the cultivation of EFL learners' intercultural communication competence and only focus on teaching EFL learners' English language

points. In order to change this situation, we must improve teaching methods, both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the cultural teaching in class and make full use of modern teaching methods (such as film, projectors, Internet, etc.) to enhance EFL learners' intercultural competence. For example, EFL learners can watch English movies, through which EFL learners can learn authentic English language. Therefore a cross-cultural language and cultural environment can be created, which can help students change long-established ways of thinking by the nation and Chinese cognitive models and make a conscious cultural empathy and cultural identity.

It's very helpful to develop extra-curricular activities to enhance EFL learners' intercultural communication competence. For example: EFL teachers can require EFL students to collect some of the foreign cultural information, such as picture books, magazines, photos, newspapers and then to study the costumes, decorations, hairstyles, etc. of the different peoples, so that they can better understand different cultures, customs, aesthetic standards, and more intuitively understand the foreign art, sculpture, architectural styles and customs. Furthermore, the use of films, televisions and videos can guide students to observe what happens in theEnglish-speaking countries. Then EFL learners can know what people eat, what people wear, what house people live and how people make friends, what festival people have, how people celebrate festivals, as well as people's facial expressions, gestures, etc. Also EFL teachers can allow EFL students to familiarize themselves with the text dialogue, and then students perform role play. In addition, EFL learners can read literatures, which is also a non –neglected element to improve EFL learners' intercultural communication competence.

Conclusion

The study highlights the problems on Chinese vocational college students' intercultural communication competence, which shows the importance and urgency to reform college English teaching. It is necessary EFL teaching quality in the Chinese vocational colleges should be improved and EFL learners' intercultural communication competence should be cultivated. EFL learners' intercultural communication competence can be promoted if the colleges, teachers and students attach great importance to and actively involved in EFL teaching reform.

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