

Constructing a Model of Intercultural Competence for Language Learners in the Context of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract: In the era of globalization, intercultural interactions have become more frequent than ever before. The ultimate goal of foreign language education in China has expanded from developing language learners' linguistic skills to promoting their intercultural competence. By reviewing the literature on intercultural competence at home and abroad, the author attempts to propose a model of intercultural competence for English learners in the context of Chinese foreign language education, which includes linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral skills. Next, suggestions are given to promote intercultural competence in foreign language teaching considering the failure of effective development of intercultural competence in Chinese learners of English. Furthermore, the author argues that foreign language teachers' intercultural competence and intercultural teaching competence play an important part in the process of development of intercultural competence in language learners.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, English has been recognized as an international language or world language. When people from different cultures meet, more often than not they would communicate with each other in English. Furthermore, the accelerated process of globalization makes cultural diversity or multiculturalism a reality throughout the world or even within a country. Living in a world where intercultural encounters and interactions are so prevailing, people need to be equipped with intercultural competence as well as linguistic skills to communicate effectively with others from across the globe.

Since the 1970s, with the evolution of language policy and planning in China, the foreign language education planning also has undergone corresponding changes, shifting from a single instrumental paradigm to a compound paradigm of the combination of instrument and culture. Decades ago, the aim of English teaching in China was to develop what Hymes referred to as "communicative competence" [12], which obviously can't meet the needs of intercultural communication in the era of globalization anymore. As a matter of fact, an increasing number of scholars and researchers have turned their attention to the development of intercultural competence of language learners on top of language proficiency. Therefore, the ultimate goal of foreign language education should be to produce

“intercultural person” or “global citizen”, in other words, to develop intercultural competence in Chinese learners of English.

2. Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is a core concept in field of intercultural communication study. Since the 1950s, scholars at home and abroad have carried out intercultural communication research and practices from the perspectives of different disciplines, and have gained fruitful achievements so far.

It is said that intercultural competence is a concept with rich connotation. Both domestic and international scholars have defined intercultural competence from their respective disciplinary angle. The fact is that different scholars have different understandings of intercultural competence in terms of its connotation and denotation. From the perspective of foreign language teaching in China, Zhang defined intercultural competence as mastering certain cultural and communicative knowledge, being able to apply these knowledge to the actual intercultural communication, being willing to accept challenges and showing tolerance and appreciation for different cultures [15]. Fantini believes that intercultural competence is the ability to communicate with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which contains a series of complex abilities which contributes to the effectiveness and appropriateness of communication [9].

Using the Delphi method, Deardorff surveyed the administrators from 24 institutions from across the United States ranging from community colleges to large research universities and 23 intercultural scholars from the United States and Canada and the United Kingdom in a variety of disciplines [7]. The findings indicate that Byram’s definition of intercultural competence was the most popular among the administrators of colleges and universities. According to Byram, intercultural competence refers to “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. Linguistic competence plays a key role” [4]. In other words, intercultural competence is the combination of intercultural knowledge, skills, attitudes and critical cultural awareness. On the other hand, the most popular definition of intercultural competence among intercultural scholars is “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” [7]. It can be found that most of the administrators of higher institutions prefer a more general definition of construct than specific one that contains detailed components. By contrast, the intercultural scholars tend to be interested in specific definition of intercultural competence, which provides a wide range of components such as openness, curiosity and so on.

Although different scholars have given different definitions to intercultural competence, they basically agree that intercultural competence include three essential dimensions: positive intercultural attitude, sufficient intercultural knowledge, and appropriate and effective intercultural communicative skills. Based on the definition and connotation of intercultural competence, domestic and international scholars have put forward many theoretical models and practical frameworks of intercultural competence from different perspectives, which has enriched the understanding of intercultural competence. In the following part, four models of intercultural competence by three intercultural scholars will be reviewed and commented. They are Byram’s model of intercultural competence, Deardorff’s pyramid model and process model, and Zhang and Yao’s integrated model for Chinese students intercultural competence development [4,7,16].

From the perspective of foreign language education in Europe, Byram put forward a model of intercultural competence including intercultural knowledge, intercultural attitude, intercultural skills and critical cultural awareness on the premise of emphasizing linguistic competence [4]. This model aims at producing global citizens who are supposed to interact effectively and appropriatedly with

people from a variety of cultures and participate actively in coping with global issues. It has been an influential model in the field of foreign language education in Europe and even in China. The model has two remarkable characteristics. Firstly, it deals with foreign language teaching objectives and intercultural communication objectives by integrating linguistic competence and intercultural competence. This feature makes up for the previous omission of cultural teaching in the language teaching and the neglect of the development of linguistic skills in intercultural communication study. Secondly, it incorporates critical cultural awareness into the model of intercultural competence. In the context of economic globalization and cultural diversity, communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds have been more frequent than ever before. Critical cultural awareness can not only enhance interactants' cultural self-confidence, but also give them a better understanding of other cultures, which contributes a lot to effectiveness of intercultural communication. However, the model has its shortcomings. It was proposed from the western perspective, which may not be applicable to the intercultural competence teaching in the Chinese context.

Deardorff proposed pyramid model and process model from the perspective of higher education in the American context. Both the two models cover the three dimensions of attitude, knowledge and skills, which are essential for successful intercultural communication [7]. In addition, they also include the desired internal and external outcome, which are often missing in other models of intercultural competence. In terms of the development level of intercultural competence, the pyramid model presents a bottom-up developmental structure. Attitude is the premise of knowledge acquisition and skills improvement. Knowledge and skills are the basis for gaining the desired internal outcome and then achieving the desired external outcome. The process model emphasizes that the development of intercultural competence is a complex and on-going process. In the two models, Deardorff does not include interactants' (foreign) language competence because she believes that (foreign) language competence does not have a great impact on individual's development of intercultural competence, which obviously does not meet the practical requirements of foreign language education in China.

Drawing on the previous research of intercultural competence at home and abroad, Zhang and Yao proposed an integrated model for Chinese student's intercultural competence development [16]. Considering the reality of multicultural context of living and work environment, this model aims at producing global citizens in the era of globalization. It covers 19 elements under three dimensions: cognitive understanding, emotional attitude and behavioral skills. Among them, cognitive understanding refers to the understanding and mastery of native and foreign cultural knowledge, which is also the starting point in the context of foreign language teaching in China. This is because intercultural awareness often starts from the learning of foreign cultures and the comparison and contrast of Chinese and foreign cultures. Based on the intercultural knowledge and awareness, a positive and open intercultural attitude can easily develop. Eventually, intercultural skills for intercultural communication will improve. This model has two main characteristics. Firstly, it emphasizes the synchronous development of intercultural competence and linguistic competence. That is to say, the development of intercultural competence is inseparable from the improvement of language proficiency. Secondly, it integrates the development of intercultural competence into the all education stages of primary school, middle school and university. This is the first integrated model for the development of students' intercultural competence throughout all the education stages of foreign language education in China. As the development of intercultural competence is an on-going process, it solves the problem of inconsistent understanding of intercultural competence development in all kinds of English syllabus at all levels, and also provides a theoretical basis for the development of intercultural competence of primary, middle and university students in the future.

Based on the review of the definitions and models of intercultural competence, we can know that, first of all, intercultural competence has rich connotation and is a combination of cultural knowledge, emotional attitude and behavioral skills. The lack or deficiency of any element would have a negative

impact on the overall development of intercultural competence. Therefore, teachers are supposed to include all the components of intercultural competence when they teach intercultural competence in classroom. To conclude, intercultural competence is a very inclusive and complex concept. The full development of intercultural competence is an on-going journey, which would take one's continuous effort to improve it throughout life.

3. Proposing a Model of Intercultural Competence for Language Learners

Models can represent ideals and also can represent reality in a schematized and simplified way, which helps us to see the essence of what is being proposed [5]. Based on the previous literature review, the author proposes a model of English learners' intercultural competence in foreign language teaching in China (see Figure 1 below).

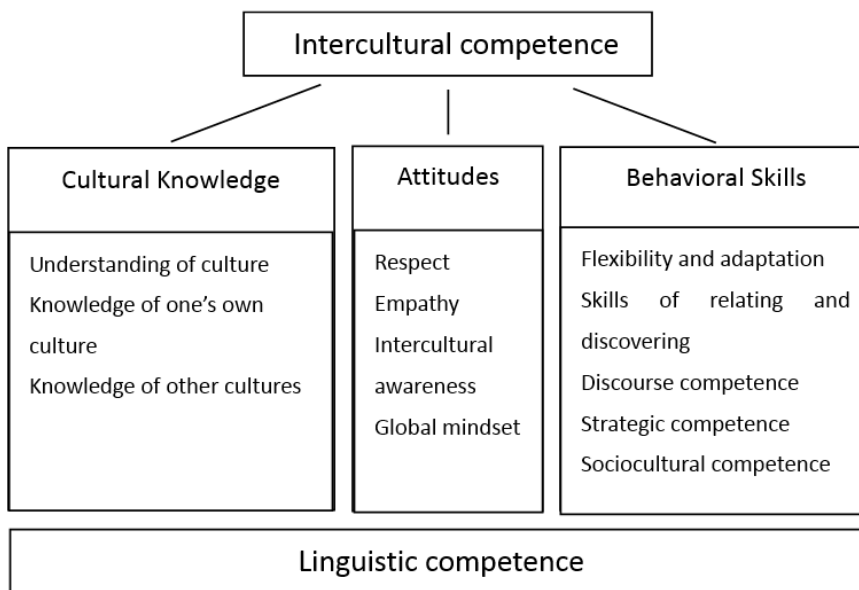


Figure 1: The model of intercultural competence for English learners

As Zhang notes, the ultimate goals of intercultural-based foreign language teaching are to develop learners' intercultural competence at a higher level as well as their linguistic competence at a primary level. The achievement of the higher-level goal is based on the fulfillment of the primary-level [15]. Therefore, linguistic competence in this model lays the foundation for the development of intercultural competence. This model of intercultural competence for English learners contains four dimensions, i.e. linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, attitudes and behavioral skills.

3.1 Linguistic competence

Linguistic competence refers to learners' ability to listen, speak, read, and write in the target language, which indicates that learners are expected to possess certain language skills. These basic language skills are the essential parts of intercultural competence. As Brislin noted, among the most important skills identified as crucial to the cultural adaptation process is the competent use of the host country's language [3]. Competence in the target language will assure minimum loss of information transfer between interactants. Those with the strongest second language competence should be expected to experience the least amount of stress [10]. Thus higher level of proficiency in target language contributes a lot to effective communication between people from different cultures.

3.2 Cultural knowledge

As is known to all, language and culture are closely interrelated by nature. The closely bound-up relationship between language and culture suggests that language cannot be divorced from its culture. In this model, cultural knowledge is composed of understanding of culture, knowledge of one's own culture, and knowledge of other cultures. As culture is a very inclusive and complex concept, many a scholar in philosophy, sociology, anthropology, history and linguistics has been trying their best to define culture from their own perspectives, unfortunately, there is no widely accepted and satisfying definition of culture. Baldwin et al. listed 313 definitions of culture in *Redefining Culture* and made a quite detailed analysis from different perspectives across the disciplines [2]. In this article, culture is defined from the intercultural perspective as a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, and norms, which affect the behavior of a relatively large group of people. Only having a better understanding of culture itself can learners gain the knowledge of self-culture and other cultures and thus enhance their intercultural awareness in the process of cultural comparing and contrasting.

3.3 Attitudes

Many scholars in the field of intercultural communication agree that attitudes play a vital part in the effective development of intercultural competence [4, 7]. Attitudes refers to a set of emotions, beliefs, and behaviors toward a particular object, person, thing, or event. Attitudes can be learned and developed in the process of socialization. In this model, the attitudes dimension contains respect, cultural empathy, intercultural awareness, and global mindset.

Respect means showing respect for other cultures and cultural diversity, particularly those cultures quite different from one's own. No culture is supposed to be superior or inferior to another. Empathy, i.e. cultural empathy, is the appreciation and tolerance of different cultures which are distinct from one's own. Also it means suspending one's judgment when faced with other cultural practices or products in the process of intercultural communication.

Intercultural awareness can be considered as a process of attitudinally internalizing insights about those common understandings held by groups that dictate the predominant values, attitudes, beliefs, and outlooks of the individual [1]. This process can be integrated into three levels: awareness of superficial cultural traits, awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with ours, and awareness of how another culture feels from the insider's perspective [11]. Therefore, learners are supposed to learn to recognize the differences between their native culture and target cultures in order to enhance their intercultural awareness. Faced with the cultural differences, learners should be encouraged to develop their intercultural awareness by being tolerant, mindful and empathetic.

Global mindset refers to the individual's responsibility and concern for global issues such as environment protection, global warming, sustainable development and the like. One is willing to pay due attention to those issues and try his or her best to make contributions to coping with those issues from multiple perspectives in order to create a better world.

3.4 Behavioral skills

In this model, behavioral skills include flexibility and adaptation, skills of relating and discovering, discourse competence, strategic competence, and sociocultural competence.

When it comes to intercultural communication, adequate knowledge of language and culture, together with positive attitude, does not necessarily guarantee effective communication and desired outcomes. They do help lay sound foundations for the potential for enhancement of intercultural competence. When people from different cultures communicate with each other, it is inevitable to

experience some uncertainties or even anxieties. Besides, an intercultural competent person has to be flexible in dealing with the misunderstanding or conflicts in the process of intercultural communication. Being ready and highly flexible to adjust one's speech act to adapt to cultural differences also plays a very important role in the intercultural communication. Finally, the skills of discovering new cultural knowledge in intercultural communication also help the development of intercultural competence.

Discourse competence refers to learners' knowledge of rules of discourse in terms of cohesion and coherence of the organization of spoken and written texts in different contexts. It also refers to learners' ability of how to interpret the texts. Strategic competence is composed of mastery of verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies that may be called in action for two main reasons: to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communicative competence and to enhance the effectiveness of communication [6]. Stern defines strategic competence as the creativity of language use. It involves communicators' ability to use communicative strategies to avoid or reduce communication breakdown [14]. Sociocultural competence refers to learners' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in a variety of sociocultural contexts with the help of target language. It involves both the willingness and the skills to interact with others and the ability to handle different social situations.

4. Promoting Intercultural Competence in English as a Foreign Language Teaching

It is widely accepted in China that one of the ultimate goals of foreign language education is to develop learners' intercultural competence, however, many English teachers failed to teach intercultural competence to Chinese learners of English in classroom [13, 15]. The possible reasons are as follows: English teachers' low level of intercultural competence, English teachers' incompetence in teaching intercultural competence, the gap between the theory and practice of intercultural competence development.

4.1 Developing intercultural competence in English teachers

To enhance learners' intercultural competence entails that teachers have to be equipped with sound and profound knowledge and practical skills of intercultural competence. Zhang argues that English teachers' intercultural competence should be developed in terms of the following three aspects: intercultural knowledge, intercultural awareness and intercultural skills. As teachers, they are required to have a good command of knowledge of intercultural competence and know how to implement the theory into teaching practice to effectively improve learners' intercultural competence [15]. One of the best policies is to launch a variety of intercultural teaching programs to ensure that teachers are well equipped with high level of intercultural competence. For example, schools can offer English teachers in-service intercultural training programs on campus or between campuses by inviting scholars and professors specialized in intercultural competence from universities as well as institutions.

4.2 Developing intercultural teaching competence in English teachers

Teachers themselves are intercultural competent does not necessarily mean that they are competent teachers in developing learners' intercultural competence. Therefore, teachers need to receive training for intercultural teaching. Zhang suggests that the training for intercultural teaching is to help teachers in the following ways: defining the objectives of intercultural teaching, designing syllabus for intercultural teaching; selecting effective intercultural teaching methods; giving assignments for intercultural study; establishing assessment methods for intercultural study [15]. All

the aspects of training for intercultural teaching need to be well interlocked with each other to make it effective. In other words, English teachers need to define clear and specific teaching objectives, choose appropriate teaching content and adopt useful teaching methods in the process of designing of intercultural competence teaching. As far as the evaluation of learners' progress in development of intercultural competence, teachers should adopt diversified rather than single assessment method. Furthermore, the development of intercultural competence is an on-going process, which can not be realized through classroom teaching overnight. Thus, when it comes to curriculum, designer should make a long-term plan and take into account the developmental process of intercultural competence in English learners at different educational levels.

4.3 Bridging the gap between theory and practice of intercultural competence teaching

As far as the status quo of teaching intercultural competence in practice concerned, several surveys of English teachers from a wide range of Chinese universities and colleges indicate that the respondents are willing to support intercultural competence teaching, however, they don't feel confident in accomplishing different tasks in intercultural communication and their teaching practices have been not yet characterized as directed towards the full attainment of intercultural competence. In other words, English teachers are very supportive of teaching intercultural competence to students, but they don't have a clue how to teach it effectively in classroom. Although literature shows that many theories and models of intercultural competence have been proposed, there are no practical guidelines or framework for them to follow in practice. There are some general requirements and descriptions of developing intercultural competence in some national documents like the national English curriculum, however, they are not theoretically based and practical enough to support teachers' classroom teaching. Therefore, it is of vital importance to establish a system or framework to provide teachers with specific guidelines for developing learners' intercultural competence in the English classroom [13].

5. Conclusion

This article begins with the introduction of the shifting of the goals and focus of English as a foreign language education in the past several decades in China. During 1970s-1990s, the major goal of English teaching was to improve learners' language proficiency in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing. With the process of globalization, English has established itself as an international language in the 21st century, the goal of English teaching has expanded from developing learners' linguistic competence to their intercultural competence. Based on the current literature review of intercultural competence studies both at home and abroad, the author proposes a model of intercultural competence for English language learners by taking into account of the reality of foreign language education in China. Furthermore, the author argues that the development of English learners' intercultural competence requires that teachers should first be well-equipped with intercultural competence and intercultural teaching competence. Lastly, the author discussed the difficulties in the process of intercultural competence teaching in the context of foreign language education and then put forward some suggestions for dealing with those difficulties.

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