

Exploration and Practice of Intercultural Communication Education in a Chinese Applied University

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Abstract: In the context of global mobility and intercultural communication, the growing learning needs and cross-cultural communicative needs of Chinese college graduates have put forward new requirements for domestic higher education curriculum. Although many higher education institutions have made various attempts on intercultural related teaching and learning, many previous practices are still based on an essentialist perspective of theory. Based on the research setting of Sichuan University Jinjiang College, a leading applied university in China, this paper explores the path and practical forms of intercultural communication education in foreign language classrooms, and makes a critical reflection based on the non-essentialist understanding of intercultural communicative theory.

1. Introduction

With the increasing trans-territorial mobility of international talents around the globe, higher education institutions in China feel growing need for the cultivation of interculturally competent graduates. Intercultural communication education (ICE) has been introduced into the foreign language classrooms involving the ideas of intercultural communicative competence, interculturality, and critical intercultural literacy. Recently, it has been increasingly realized that English and other foreign language learning not only work for international communication at the linguistic level, but also as important means of effective pragmatic understanding and the realization of foreign language learners' multicultural identity. In this paper, the terms of cross-cultural and intercultural would be used interchangeably. According to the policy of the Ministry of Education of China, firmly stipulated in the "National Standards" (2020), intercultural communication competence should be regarded as an important learning goal in English and foreign language teaching and learning in Chinese higher education (HE) institutions. This has to do with the educators' pedagogical success and the students' development into "Good interculturalists" [2]. The main issue of various scholarship and mixed theoretical perspectives put the methodological practice of ICE onto a heated topic. Therefore, the realization and application of intercultural communication teaching and learning under the Chinese higher education context in local schools should be explored for nuanced understanding.

2. RICH-Ed project and inspirations

In the field of intercultural communication education, there are transnational cooperation projects represented by “Resources for Interculturality in Chinese Higher Education (RICH-Ed)” [4], whose aim is to develop teaching methods and materials for intercultural teaching and learning for teachers and students, and to explore how the relevant research and theories emerging from the internationally published papers inform the practice of ICE on the soil of Chinese higher education. Developing practice in the domestic education system is not only based on the established theoretical framework from the literature in western mainstream countries, but also needs to combine the traditional Chinese philosophy and non-essentialism cultural values detached from a west-centric stance to explore feasible and contextual approaches and other local pedagogical endeavours. Based on RICH-Ed's requirements in educational reform, teacher development, intercultural learning and the integration of Chinese and Western academic perspectives, universities in China are also actively exploring individuated attempts and programs in accordance with these initiatives. ICE aims to stimulate educational reform and development of Global Citizenship. This research, informed by fluid, dynamic and co-constructed view on intercultural theory and practice, focuses on the English language classrooms in local HE context, explores the concrete experience in the realization of intercultural education, and makes a reflective observation and thinking.

3. Intercultural communication teaching modules

Many domestic English textbooks work as a provider of observable culture facts, not effective in helping learners critically interpret the complex culture idiosyncrasies nor facilitate culture-related meaning-making, thus limiting the potential for interculturality. Many home teachers and students within Chinese HE have limited access to overseas study experience. Therefore, learners and educators are included into a series of modules designed for linguistic and cultural diversity and thus and thus problematize “monocultural and monolingual ideologies” [3]. An effective teaching module is the key to improve cross-cultural thinking consciousness and cultivate interculturality. To make students constantly reflect on their doubts and prejudices, overcome stereotypes, and cultivate critical thinking. The following are some examples of intercultural teaching in English classes since 2020, based on the non-essentialist cultural perspective of Sichuan University Jinjiang College.

4. Research background

The Sichuan University Jinjiang College is an applied HE institution, which was approved by the Ministry of Education in April 2006 and is jointly Sichuan University by the Ministry of Education and Sichuan Xufeng Industry Co., Ltd. The school is located in Meishan City, Sichuan province. It now has 14 secondary colleges, 53 undergraduate majors and 18 specialized majors, covering six major disciplines of arts, science, engineering, economics, management and art, for the national enrollment, the existing 21,500 students, more than 1000 teachers.

With a hundred years of great heritage and thousands of Dongpo context, plus the goal of "Creating the first-class undergraduate university in China and building the Chinese-style Small Ivy League", the school practices the school-running philosophy of student-oriented, all-round specialty with equal emphasis, unity of knowledge and practice, and mutual benefit of teaching and learning, adhering to the school motto of respecting virtue and learning, to the vast and subtle, carrying forward the Jinjiang spirit of people-oriented, seeking truth and pragmatism, pursuing excellence. In this research setting, multicultural understanding and development international personhood are emphasized for the production of competent graduates for China and the globe.

5. Local pedagogical endeavors

5.1 Tasks on intercultural citizenship

Essentialist view of culture tend to perceive the world in a dichotomy of self and other, regardless of the complex features of culture. As a result, pedagogy based on this starting point would simplify ICE into the mere learning of pre-defined culture knowledge and fail to encourage critical stance on culture interpretations (i.e., ideas, feelings attitudes). Therefore, non-essentialism should be included to appreciate the multiplicity of voices and identities, which puts more weight on responsible engagement and interactive harmony in cross-cultural interactions. In this case, ICE should be concerned with the continuous development and life-long learning process as “intercultural citizenship” [5]. ICE’s theoretical inclination towards formative development of intercultural being means that some established views on “intercultural citizenship” could be drawn upon for real-life endeavors:

1) Use of experiential excursion to U.S.: relates to “citizen of the whole world”, induces a sense of communal inter-connectedness for the co-construction of self-other harmony.

2) Use of cosmopolitan tasks: designed to promote critical cultural awareness, linguistic diversity, interactive strategies in ELF (English as a lingua franca).

3) Role-play of international citizens being patriotic, at the same time embrace both diversity and differences, remain critical of inequalities and biases, negotiate a harmonious relationship, with mutual benefit, respect, and understanding as the common goal.

4) Motivate college students to life-long learning even beyond graduation and learn to be responsible intercultural citizens in interaction with various social contexts.

In an applied school like Jinjiang College, these ICE pedagogical modules are inspired by the non-essentialist perspective of cross-cultural communication. From this perspective, educators expect an evolvement of personhood and awareness from the students in critical intercultural realm, instead of regarding ICE as a mere passive receptacle of cultural facts and knowledge.

5.2 Spreading “Good Chinese stories”

By implementing the dissemination of “Good Chinese stories” in a foreign language, students are not only encouraged to tell Chinese stories and Chinese culture in English (a cultural essentialist way of understanding), but also need to take advantage of authentic material through multimedia, form close connection with “other culture”, avoid to fall into the cave of the static perception of cultural differences. This enables students to take on the responsibility of global citizenship, to understand different cultures from multiple perspectives, to understand interculturality, and to further practice the cross-cultural identity of foreign language learners. For example, one topic of social media popularity is about the Chinese stories (such as the topic “The dialectics of ancient Chinese doctrine”) as an opportunity to form a fulcrum in the teaching process. On this topic, teaching modules including role-playing and exchange interviewing between student partners would stimulate students to excavate their version of “Story” from the intercultural communicative competence dimensions of knowledge, skills, cognitive attitudes and critical cultural awareness. For example, the Taoist philosophy, as a treasure of Chinese culture, contains the concept of yin-yang balance. Among them, “The first is kindness, the second is thrifty, and the third appreciates humility to stand out from the rest” is regarded as the three treasure proverbs of Taoism. How to make such cultural delicacies gain international recognition in academic and social aspects is essentially a cross-cultural negotiation. The core of negotiation is the common inspiration based on mutual understanding of cultural facts. There is a common connection between Taoist ideas and Western philosophy: for example, the balance of yin and yang is similar to the Western negation of binary system, reflecting the harmonious

unity of relevance and dialectics. Compassion, frugality and humility in Chinese philosophy correspond to compassion, openness and humility in western realm. The cross-cultural teaching of “Good Chinese stories” enables students to understand the cultural facts of their native and target language communities, and they can also learn appropriate interactive skills based on culture, participants' personalities, and the ecological context. Therefore, culture is viewed as a two-way perspective that promotes cross-cultural tolerance at the affective level. Not only does it bring “Good Chinese stories” around the world and greatly enhance the global audience's positive view of Chinese culture, but the value of “Good stories” can be truly demonstrated, to gain the sincere respect and recognition of the international audience.

5.3 Critical cultural incident tasks

Another common teaching practice is the critical cultural incident task, which refers to a communication situation in which participants encounter conflicts in dilemma situations and unexpected interactions. Flannagan [1] defined it as procedure for collecting direct observations of human behavior to promote its potential use in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles. In the task, the learner can clearly perceive the differences and conflicts between cultures, and at the same time, the individual characteristics and ecological environment of the participants under the conflicted environment are also considered. The key to resolving conflicts is to inspire empathy and keep an open and tolerant attitude so that learners can analyze situations critically. In the critical event task, the teacher uses open-ended questions to ask the learners to analyze and explain the situation, and encourages more interactive participation and dialogue. The task of open-ended questions not only provides language practice for foreign language learners, but also promotes them to use cultural factual knowledge to deal with cross-cultural situations actively and effectively improve intercultural communication competence. For example, in one case, a teacher in the teaching and research group recalled her own experience as a student: in a foreign teacher's class at a domestic university. After seeing the foreign teacher dressed so thin, the Chinese students considering the cold weather, out of concern for foreign teachers said: “You should wear an extra coat.” The foreign teachers' replies were “Don't tell me what to do” and “You should mind your own business”. The student felt embarrassed and frustrated, and he made his comment on the evaluation of teaching job at the end of the term: this foreign teacher received a low score. In this key event task, the practitioner conducted an open-ended questioning, questions such as “What was the point of misunderstanding?” “How do you think participant A/B should take into account each other's cultural background?” and “Are cultural differences related to conflict in the event?” The students were trained in this scenario by working with other participants to find solutions, listening to group reports and team member reflection, and gradually correcting cultural stereotypes and misconceptions and reflecting on past experiences. It is expected that students could take the initiative to put oneself in another's position and seek individual and cultural explanation of the conflicts. The students recalled that these activities have developed their curiosity and empathy to actively observe, analyze, evaluate, and interpret in order to communicate and empathize appropriately. This training demonstrates that critical cultural incidents become a new way of experiencing the self and understanding the culture of others.

6. Research reflections

6.1 Language's role in ICE

The following reflections emerge from the research data: many students believe that there is a strong link between English language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence, and

that their language skills and many intercultural concepts are interdependent. However, the way in which English is related to ICE is more multidimensional and complex. The students realized that the relationship between language and culture is also influenced by the ecological context of language use and the Interlocutor's personality, and even the affective factors of language users should be considered. In addition, the participants also mentioned the reality of multilingualism and multiculturalism in a global context, not limited to proficiency of English. With the rise of the international status of Chinese, some students believe that the use of Chinese can also promote cross-cultural communication and the development of intercultural literacy. The students talked about the definition of English as a national language and an international language, which also shows the mixture and complexity of language's role.

6.2 ICE on intercultural awareness

The students agreed with the practical modules in the school curriculum for the opportunity and effectiveness of intercultural communication. By understanding the stories of different cultures, we become more tolerant and respect differences, which is a change in rational cognition. However, due to the lack of overseas experience, some of the students could not give too much detailed feedback on the critical intercultural awareness and identity. Although their awareness of judgment is not explicit, it should not be denied that the students' positive attitude and the motivation for multicultural experience remain distinct thorough these tasks. At the same time, the international status of Chinese makes the national regional identity and cross-cultural citizenship to a certain extent, resulting in friction. In a related vein, some students have questioned whether the western-born theory of intercultural education applies to teaching practices in China, and what criteria are used to measure the success of ICE, is it on essentialism or non-essentialism?

7. Conclusions

The above research shows that telling good Chinese stories from a two-way perspective, and applying critical cultural event work effectively to promote intercultural communicative literacy. At the same time, critical reflection reveals that the cross-cultural non-essentialism will co-exist with the cultural essentialism for a long time, which is a limitation that even the teachers concerned cannot get rid of in a short period of time. But in the future, it can also be taken as the starting point of intercultural education and even transcultural training. Because these pedagogical endeavors found that students have a strong motivation in cross-cultural communication for mutual harmonious negotiation and active mediation, as well as equal and open communication with other cultures. These show that cross-cultural personnel training in China's higher education environment has a high value of exploration and unique significance for development.

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