

# Cultivating Intercultural Communication Competence in Spoken English Teaching

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**Abstract:** The increasingly frequent intercultural encounters highlight the significance of intercultural communication competence to successful and smooth communication. Intercultural communication competence is composed of the four parts of verbal communication competence, nonverbal communication competence, competence of cultural adaptation/ adjustment, and competence of transformation of linguistic and communication rules. Based on an analysis of the deficiencies of students' intercultural communication competence from the four aspects of linguistic deficiency, pragmatic deficiency, non-linguistic deficiency and cultural differences deficiency, strategies to cultivate intercultural communication competence are proposed, including consolidating students' spoken English foundation, enhancing teachers' intercultural communication competence, cultivating intercultural awareness, strengthening self-knowledge, and improving students' ability to cope with conflicts.

## 1. Introduction

The aim of spoken English teaching lies in cultivating students' ability to communicate smoothly in English. With the international contacts getting more and more frequent, intercultural communication has become a normal. However, as there are obvious differences in historic traditions, customs, cultural backgrounds between nations, various problems occur when people are engaged in communication. Hence, spoken English teaching should take culture as a starting point, so as to enhance students' intercultural communication awareness and cultivate students' intercultural communication competence.

## 2. Intercultural Communication Competence

To cultivate students' intercultural communication competence, we need to get an overall understanding of its connotation and components.

### 2.1. Connotation of Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) refers to the competence to communicate in intercultural circumstances, i.e., "the competence to successfully accomplish communication process when people from different cultural backgrounds are able to show strong intercultural

awareness, identify cultural differences and eliminate cultural interferences at intercultural encounters”<sup>[1]</sup>.

As different cultural backgrounds tend to result in inappropriate or ineffective communication behaviours, intercultural communication competence has two key conditions. One is suitability, which means the communicators should have the capability to suit their communication behaviours to changing communicative situations. The other one is effectiveness, which means the communicators have the capability to fulfil the expectations of the communication behaviour and achieve the expected effect.

## **2.2. Components of Intercultural Communication Competence**

Intercultural communication competence is composed of four parts: verbal communicative competence, nonverbal communicative competence, competence of cultural adaptation/ adjustment, and competence of transformation of two rules.

### **2.2.1. Verbal Communicative Competence**

Verbal communicative competence is the foundation and core of intercultural communication competence. It consists of both the competence to understand and master necessary verbal knowledge and the competence to use the cultural connotation as well as the conceptual meaning of language. It not only represents that the linguistic use is correct, but also represents that language use is appropriate under specified contexts, i.e., different language choices are made when communicating in different conversational situations, with different conversation partners and on different occasions.

### **2.2.2. Nonverbal Communicative Competence**

Nonverbal communicative competence is important in communicative means and behaviours other than verbal communication. The ability to cope successfully in nonverbal communication is equally important. Nonverbal communication consists of the four parts of kinesics, paralanguage, object language and environmental language. Kinesics includes the movements of one’s body, postures, haptics, etc.; paralanguage includes nonverbal sounds, silence, turn-taking, etc.; object language includes makeup, dressing, body odor reduction, etc.; environmental language includes distance, space, time, sound and light, seating and signs, etc.

### **2.2.3. Competence of Cultural Adaptation/ Adjustment**

Competence of cultural adaptation refers to the mutual adaptability of the communicators and their competence to adapt to foreign cultural environment in intercultural communication. Competence of cultural adaptation means that participants of the intercultural communication are able to correctly identify and understand their communication partners, are good at overcoming the potential culture shocks, and are able to make appropriate adjustments in their own speech, behaviour, emotions, attitude, ways of thinking, and communication codes, and so on, so that they can adapt to different living, studying, working and interpersonal environments from different cultures, and thus get accepted by people from different cultures.

### **2.2.4. Competence of Transformation of Two Rules**

The two rules refer to linguistic rule and communication rule. Linguistic rule is the unity of phonetic rule, lexical rule and grammatical rule, and communication rule is the behaviour code that people follow in communication. All the communication behaviors among people are guided by linguistic rule and non-linguistic communication rule. It is known to all that in order to communicate smoothly between different cultures, especially between different languages, communication participants should learn linguistic rules to overcome language barrier. More importantly, the transformation of linguistic rule and communication rule should be learned as different cultures have their specific behaviour code, values, customs, etiquettes, and ways of

thinking, hence different communication rules.

### **3. Deficiencies of Intercultural Communication Competence**

The main reason that verbal communication failures frequently occur in intercultural communication is communicators' deficiencies of intercultural communication competence. These deficiencies fall into four categories: linguistic deficiency, pragmatic deficiency, non-linguistic deficiency, and cultural difference deficiency.

#### **3.1. Linguistic Deficiency**

At the linguistic level, the deficiencies of intercultural communication competence are manifested in linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence.

The concept of linguistic competence is proposed by Chomsky, the famous linguist in the United States, which means one's internalized knowledge of language and grammar. It is the continuous understanding of grammatical knowledge, and is to follow the linguistic rules. Then Carroll further developed Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence, and divided it into three components of phonetic competence, lexical competence and grammatical competence. Obviously, adequate linguistic competence is the basis for successful intercultural communication. Without correct pronunciation, sufficient vocabulary and grammar, intercultural communication cannot proceed smoothly, and intercultural communication failures are inevitable.

Sociolinguistic competence refers to communicators' ability to understand, grasp and use the language in practical communication. It also has an important impact on the quality and effect of the communication. For example, faced with the same topic, different communicators, determined by their different social background and psychological characteristics, tend to choose different vocabulary, pattern and style, and the audience may also produce different responses.

Discourse competence refers to communicators' ability to organize their speech and to understand their partners' speech. If one side of the communicators cannot fully understand their partners' speech, there will be intercultural communication failures or even conflicts.

#### **3.2. Pragmatic Deficiency**

Another important cause for intercultural communication failures is pragmatic deficiency, which is manifested in reflected in the communicators' incomprehension of conversational implicature and indirect speech act.

Conversational implicature, as the name suggests, is the implication of the speech. Ideally, when people communicate with each other, they follow cooperative principle, i.e., both parties share the same wish to understand the other's speech and make sure to produce an effective communication. But in reality, not all people follow the cooperative principle in all contexts. To achieve a certain goal, communicators often sell a dummy or beat around the bush. This requires the audience to go beyond the surface meaning of the conversation and get the deeper meaning; failure to do so will lead to collapsed intercultural communication.

Indirect speech act means that in communication another act is used to implement indirectly the speech act. To get a correct comprehension of indirect speech act, four elements are necessary: (1) an understanding of how to do things with words in communication; (2) an understanding of the implications of speech; (3) the relationship between speaker's knowledge and context information that the listener can comprehend; (4) knowledge range and comprehension ability of the listener.

#### **3.3. Non-Linguistic Deficiency**

Non-linguistic deficiency is reflected in four aspects: social factors, physiological factors, psychological factors, and body language.

Social factors include role relationship and interpersonal relationship. Every individual is located in a complicated role network, and is required to play different roles through communication. From the perspective of sociology, role refers to the expectation of a specified social group for the behaviors of a specified social identity<sup>[2]</sup>. Every individual's role is determined and influenced by interpersonal relationship. As the way that different societies are constructed varies, there are obvious differences in social structures and interpersonal relationship, and different societies have differing standards and requirements for proper role relationship and interpersonal relationship.

Physiological factors mainly include gender, age and health conditions. Psychologists and linguists have come to the same conclusion that people from different gender have distinct speech characteristics. Generally speaking, women are more talkative, and use more polite language; and in contrast, men tend to be more conservative and use stronger vocabulary. As for age, it is known to all that children speak in a different way from the adults, or the elderly. In addition, one's health condition may also affect one's performance in communication. For instance, when one is exhausted, his/ her speech, tone, pitch and even voice may be different from those when one is energetic.

Psychological factors refer to the communication desire, cooperative intention and vision of the two parties of the communication. It is easy to see that, if one party does not have the desire or the intention of communicating, the communication cannot be continued no matter what pleasant words are uttered by the other party. Moreover, communicators have different visions based on their different age, profession, and social class, which leads to their different psychological characteristics and attitudes, eventually contributing to intercultural communication breakdown.

Body language is an important auxiliary part in communication. The nonverbal communication such as eye contact, facial expression and gestures may convey different meanings in different cultures. Ignorance or neglect of the importance of body language is a reason for misunderstanding in intercultural communication.

### **3.4. Cultural Differences Deficiency**

There exist apparent cultural differences between nations in national character, history, values, customs, and geographical conditions, and so on. National character is the external reflection of a nation's cultural features. In terms of national character, Chinese people are collective-oriented, and lay stress on interpersonal harmony as well as the harmony between nature and man; whereas the western people are more individual-oriented and attach importance to independence and equality. Geographical conditions, as the cradle to nurture a certain culture, have an effect on the structure of human society and thus transform social behaviors. For example, Chinese farming culture developed on the relatively closed continent, so in the Chinese culture interpersonal relationship and a sense of belonging is valued; the western entrepreneurship was promoted in part by the coastal environment, so in the western culture individualism and spirit of exploration is valued.

## **4. Strategies to Cultivate ICC in Spoken English Teaching**

### **4.1. Consolidating Spoken English Foundation**

To conduct intercultural communication successfully, the communicators should have a good grasp of target language information system, including language knowledge and language skills; at the same time the communicators should have a correct understanding of the relationship between language and culture, and in addition they need to master nonverbal communication system.

In spoken English teaching, teachers should help the students to get a good command of basic knowledge such as phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, language function, conversational skills, everyday conversation topics and typical questions, etc. Language and culture are closely related;

language embodies culture and also reflects culture. This is manifested especially obvious in proverbs and sayings. The actual deeper meaning of English sayings is often quite different from their literal meaning, and are often derived from English culture. So, it is not only necessary but also important to explain the cultural knowledge behind the sayings and proverbs to make sure that the students can understand the English sayings correctly and use them properly in intercultural communication. Apart from the linguistic knowledge, nonverbal signs also play an important role in intercultural communication, so the teachers should take time to explain the cultural differences in body language to avoid misunderstanding.

#### **4.2. Enhancing Teachers' Intercultural Communication Competence**

College English teachers, as the leader and facilitator in spoken English teaching, play a key role in cultivating students' intercultural communication competence. So, the teachers should be the first to have adequate intercultural communication competence. In other words, only when the teachers are equipped with strong intercultural communication competence can the students be taught to improve their intercultural communication competence.

In spoken English teaching, on one hand, college English teachers can supplement cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries on the basis of the textbook so as to lead the students to realize that there exist apparent differences between different cultures, for example, between Chinese culture and American culture, or between Chinese culture and British culture; on the other hand, teachers can guide the students to conduct contrast and analysis of the two cultures and summarize the similarities and differences.

#### **4.3. Cultivating Intercultural Awareness**

The concept of intercultural awareness was proposed by famous scholar Robert G. Hanvey, which can be understood as understanding and acceptance of cultural differences. Intercultural awareness means that communicators can not only have a clear understanding of their own culture, but also seek to understand the characteristics of another culture. Having intercultural awareness enables the communicators to recognize cultural differences based on a good understanding of two cultures, and have an open mind to accept and deal with these cultural differences. People with intercultural awareness admit and embrace cultural diversity and they reject the idea that one certain culture is superior to another but hold that all cultures are equal and should exist in their own right.

To cultivate students' intercultural awareness, the students need to satisfy the following conditions: students should have spoken English foundation at a higher level; they should have the ability to acquire information of English-speaking countries; they should have adequate comprehensive ability of cultures; they should hold an objective attitude toward cultures of English-speaking countries; and they should possess remarkable communicative competence.

The content that need to be taught to students in cultivating their intercultural awareness includes vocabulary about culture, values, standard social conduct, and nonverbal communication. In addition students should be taught to overcome the following barriers such as cultural iceberg, and incorrect cultural conceptions such as cultural stereotypes, cultural prejudice, and cultural ethnocentrism.

#### **4.4. Strengthening Students' Self-knowledge**

As students' own culture, communicative style, emotions, and attitude all have a bearing on the effect of intercultural communication, teachers of spoken English should guide the students to strengthen their self-knowledge through self-observation.

Communicators often resort to their own culture to make judgment when they meet people from a different background. In the same way in intercultural communication students often base their conclusions on their own national values and social codes. So, a better understanding of the

advantages and disadvantages of one's own national culture can help the students to be more open-minded.

Communicative style refers to the communicators' favorite topic, communicative form, communicative channel, expected participation of the communication partners, the extent of information that they give and the extent of emotions they convey, etc. A correct understanding of one's communicative style will facilitate intercultural communication.

Emotions and attitude of the communicators sometimes can determine the quality of the intercultural communication. Before the communication certain emotions or attitudes may arise to cause an impression in advance, which may result in misunderstanding or wrong judgment. If the students can be reminded to prevent this preconception the intercultural communication will be exempted from certain negative attitude.

#### 4.5. Improving Students' Ability to Cope with Conflicts

Conflicts are inevitable in communication, and in intercultural communication conflicts tend to arise more than usual. Communicators must be able to cope with conflicts if they intend the communication to proceed. Teachers of spoken English can teach the students the following ways to cope with conflicts: withdrawal, competition, settlement, compromise, and cooperation. Among these above-mentioned ways, cooperation is the most constructive and desirable.

### 5. Conclusions

Intercultural communication competence, as the key to successful intercultural communication in this globalized world, enables communicators to recognize and respect cultural diversity and conduct properly in intercultural communication. Despite the growing importance of intercultural communication competence, its deficiencies often cause failures in practice. Thus, various effective strategies should be taken to cultivate students' intercultural communication competence so that communicators' goal in communication can be achieved.

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