Intercultural Competence Enhancement for English Majors in China

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Abstract

Language educators strive to nurture proficient language learners, with the definition of ‘language competence’ undergoing various stages of change and evolution. Initially, educators focused solely on linguistic competence as their teaching goal, only to realize its inadequacy. In China, scholars in the field of language education are directing their attention toward fostering students’ cross-cultural competence. This is because such competence is not only related to the pragmatic proficiency of language users but also crucial for the effectiveness of language as a bridge for international cultural communication. In this paper, we will explore the details of cultural learning and teaching within the realm of higher education in China, specifically highlighting the enhancement of intercultural competence (IC) for English majors in Chinese universities. The analysis of IC development in this context will encompass three key facets: the conceptualization and evolution of IC in second and foreign language (L2) education, the application of IC approaches in higher education in China, and the implications of language learning and teaching for both English majors and their instructors in Chinese universities.

Keywords

Intercultural competence, English majors, language teaching pedagogy, Chinese college education

1. Introduction

The fast-changing and super-diverse world is pushing people to rethink about two questions: What is ‘culture’? And how does it impact our lives? For language educators, the role of culture in language learning and usage has long been a hot theme in their research. In the year of 2008, Anthony Liddicoat made a summary to explain the relationship between language and culture: ‘Language expresses culture and culture is realized through language’ (Zhou, 2011). Strong evidence has shown that increasing attention has been attached to ‘culture’ in the field of language education in the past decades. Furthermore, it leads to the appearance of the concept of ‘intercultural competence’ (IC).

Broadly speaking, intercultural competence refers to the ability to think, act, communicate, and work effectively and appropriately in various cultural backgrounds. In the world of IC, language and culture are mutually influencing and influenced (Kramsch, 2019).

Michael Byram is one of the leading scholars in the field of intercultural communication research. His and many other researchers’ works have inspired educators to apply IC-related theories to the teaching practice in a diverse classroom context. In this article, I will discuss cultural learning and teaching in the context of higher education in China. More precisely, attention will be paid to the IC enhancement for English majors in Chinese universities.

The development of IC in the context described above will be analyzed from the following three aspects:
conceptualization and the development of IC in second and foreign language (L2) education; the application of IC approach in higher education in China; and the implications of language learning and teaching for English majors and their teachers in Chinese universities.

2. Conceptualization of Intercultural Competence and Theories of IC

Language educators strive to cultivate competent language learners. And the definition of ‘language competence’ has changed and evolved through several stages. Educators once took linguistic competence as their only teaching goal, and soon they found out it was not enough. Then Hymes (1972) brought communicative competence onto the stage, and it was the starting point of taking culture into consideration in the development of language education pedagogy. However, culture is still not taken as a major part of L2 education at this stage. Thus Bryam (1997) challenges the communicative approach, and he proposes that L2 learners should also be able to act inter-culturally, which means intercultural competence should also be included in the elements of language competence.

The motivation for the researchers in the field of interculturality comes from two parts. First of all, the world is moving towards globalization, technologization, and super-diversity. Thus, educators have the responsibility to prepare their students for a dynamic, changing, and global tomorrow (Mahon & Cushner, 2011). In other words, language learners should be equipped with the capability of interacting and communicating effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. And this ability is the core connotation of intercultural competence. Secondly, the development of IC is associated with the challenge to the ‘native speaker’ concept. Two important researchers in this field: Byram and Kramsch both reject the native speaker mode (Wilkinson, 2011), and Byram presents the notion of ‘intercultural speaker’ in order to replace ‘native speaker’. Instead of blindly pursuing the standard structures and copying the foreign culture, the intercultural speakers aim at mediating across linguistic and cultural borders, and they are able to critically engage in cultural activities and evaluate familiar and unfamiliar cultural phenomena (Wilkinson, 2011, p. 297).

The definition of intercultural competence is rather complex and debatable because it is constantly changing and supplemented by different scholars in different contexts (Dervin, 2016). Part of the definition of intercultural competence is reflected in the motivations mentioned above, and other scholars define IC through theory construction. Byram (1997) was the first one to introduce intercultural communication to L2 classrooms through his notable model of intercultural competence (as cited in Zhou, 2011) and his framework has defined the five components of IC.

According to Byram (1997), savoirs refers to the knowledge of self and others, namely the ‘knowledge base’ of what culture and whose culture; savoir apprendre/faire concerns the ability to discover and acquire new knowledge in interaction; savoir comprendre requires the learner to be an interpreter and a mediator between the target and home culture (Zhou, 2011); savoir être represents the attitudes for accepting news, revitalizing self and valuing other. Savoir s’engager was added later by Byram, and it is defined as the ability to make a critical evaluation of one’s own and other cultures and countries (Byram, 1997, p. 63), and it is associated with the investigation and understanding of the ideological perspectives of others.

In addition, in the age of artificial intelligence (AI), intercultural competence is embedded with new meaning. Kamperman and his fellow scholars mentioned in their article that the ability to facilitate cross-cultural technology-mediated communication should also be included in the spectrum of IC (2021). As the world gets smarter and closer, language users are expected to perform under a new behaviour code in e-collaboration.

3. The Application of the IC Approach in Higher Education in China

Although Byram’s model of IC has been recognised as a debatable framework and has received critiques from scholars (Dervin, 2016), it still has a significant influence on the educational field in Western countries. Consequently, Chinese educators of higher education also are making an effort to highlight the role of culture in curriculum planning and enhance learners’ intercultural competence. Generally speaking, their efforts are in line with the five components of IC raised by Byram (1997).

For pursuing the savoirs (knowledge of self and others) and the savoir comprendre (skills of interpreting and relating) components, changes are made in China’s national College English Curriculum Requirements for both non-English students and English majors (Zhou, 2011). Specifically, teaching materials are improved, and teachers are encouraged to employ hybrid materials such as films, texts (Quyen Phuong, 2017) and other authentic materials such as immigrant literature genre, intercultural biographies, and other online resources (Crozet, 2016, p. 153) in order to increase the input of cultural facts. The awareness of teaching both home culture and target culture has been raised in classroom practices of Chinese universities (Zhao, 2004).

Notably, some scholars attached great importance to students’ familiarity and acquisition of Chinese culture in teaching
plans, which aims at protecting the traditional culture from being lost in the process of learning a foreign culture (as cited in Zhou, 2011, p. 37) and exporting Chinese stories to the outside world. At the same time, the activities of critical analysis and comparison of home culture and target culture are also combined in teaching practices, and all these callings and changes are for meeting the requirement of the savoir s’engager (critical cultural awareness and political education). This capability is becoming increasingly important in China. On one hand, it is crucial to integrate China into the global discourse dimension; on the other hand, standing on the common ground of cultural exchange, future English learners should shoulder the responsibility of presenting Chinese wisdom to the world (Li, 2023).

Educators in China have also designed multiple international exchange programs and increased study abroad opportunities for training college students’ savoir comprendre (the skills of discovery and interaction). IC competence development in higher education study abroad program provides students with a learner-centred and experience-based opportunity to conduct intercultural studying (Dehmel & Sloane, 2011). Thus, it is set for fostering cultural interpreters and mediators through the immersive experience.

Attention also is paid to teachers’ role in the university language classroom. Scarino and Liddicoat (2013) point out that teachers can guide students in the ‘noticing’ process of intercultural learning effectively. This ‘noticing’ period has similar features to the concept of ‘implicit input’, which means there is no clear entry or end during this process, so learners need guidance from experienced teachers. Therefore, university teachers are encouraged to share their multilingual and multicultural experiences (Kramsch & Zhang, 2018). The guiding and sharing require teachers themselves to be a curious, critical and open-minded language learners; in other words, it requires teachers to meet the demand of savoir être.

4. Critical Reflection on the Application

Cultural education and the IC approach are gaining momentum in the development of Chinese university classrooms. However, there remain obstacles on the way to implementing these pedagogies. On the one hand, the lecture structures and teaching objectives for cultural curriculum remain unclear, unsystematic, and abstract (Zhou, 2011; Lei & Soontornwipast, 2020), and some scholars have pointed out that linguistic input still dominates most classrooms (as cited in Zhou, 2011, p. 39). One of the reasons for the unbalanced development of linguistic and intercultural competence is that college teachers often struggle between constraining schedules and intercultural education responsibility (Kramsch, 2019), and they find it challenging to find appropriate and effective materials which can conform to the administrative regulations at the same time (Ge, 2004). Moreover, there is no standard examination for measuring college students’ intercultural competence. The existing Chinese national English test (for both non-English major students and English majors) cannot function as an IC measuring tool because studies show that there is a low degree of correlation between the testees’ mark and their level of IC (Ge, 2004, p. 72).

In summary, the designing deficits, the implementing difficulties, and the lack of formal tests for students’ IC are impeding the development of IC pedagogy in higher education in China. However, efforts have been made by educators and researchers in narrowing down the gap. For example, scholars endeavored to develop an evaluation checklist for English majors’ textbooks, and also to explore the aspects of assessing students’ IC scale and to conclude a scale standard (Lei & Soontornwipast, 2020; Lulu, 2022). Still, further studies need to be put in place to address the existing and upcoming obstacles.

5. Implications for English Majors and Teachers

One unique feature of education for English majors is that English plays multiple roles in their learning process. To better prepare English majors for a super-diverse future world, timely adjustments are needed in their curriculum planning. Reflecting on the application and limitations of the intercultural approach will further provide inspiration for English majors and their teachers in China. Here this paper refers to the five principles for teaching and learning languages from an intercultural perspective proposed by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) and relevant implications are summarised as follows:

The first two principles—‘active construction’ and ‘making connection’—require learners to actively engage in the meaning-making process and make the connection between the new knowledge and the previous knowledge base. According to Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), ‘Language and cultures are not acquired in isolation’. This statement is further affirmed after reviewing the saying ‘the way in which people use language is never decontextualized’. Thus, teachers can adopt critical discourse analysis in their language teaching practices. For example, CDA can be employed in the reading and writing class for English majors, and reflective blogs can be included in the assignment requirement as a way of demonstrating intercultural connection.
Studying abroad is considered the main way of experiencing social interaction and mediating between languages. However, researches show that the effect of domestic interactions and online intercultural exchanges in IC cultivation is equal to that of international and face-to-face encounters (Wang & Kulich, 2015). The impact of COVID-19 results in a more urgent need for developing online intercultural exchange resources; therefore, Chinese educators can extend approaches such as video-making, e-book sharing, and live sessions in universities.

With regard to the implications of the last two principles of reflection and responsibility, two core words—‘cross-border’ and ‘identity’—appear. With the world changing so fast, the national and geographical border no longer serves as the cultural border. This inspires learners to conduct re-assessments of the cultural differences and think critically in different identities: as an English major, as a Chinese, and as a global citizen. Educators have pointed out that ‘University students are at a sensitive age when they are still developing their cultural identities’ (as cited in Zhou, 2011). Hence, college teachers can take English as education for cosmopolitan citizenship (Guilherme, 2007), and use linguistic tools to make students be proud in one’s own identities (p. 82) and make them aware of their obligations and rights as members of various communities (p. 87). This is the first step for them as an adult after graduation.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the cultural awareness of every language learner and teacher is enhanced gradually through continuous critical reflections on the past and implications for the future. Nowadays, there is a high demand for developing a teaching pedagogy that can enhance learners’ intercultural competence in both the global and local Chinese context. For English majors, English is not merely a communicative tool but more of a platform for them to unleash their full potential in different language identities and to develop ‘insider views of the foreign culture’ and ‘outsider views of the home culture’ (Knutson, 2006, p. 600). In other words, languages will help learners understand how the world sees them and how to see the world through their own eyes.

References


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