

Exploring Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence Cultivation in Junior High School English Teaching

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Abstract

The study intended to investigate the current situation of junior high school students' intercultural communicative competence and explore some factors impacting the cultivation of students' intercultural communicative competence in English teaching. The study analyzed three factors impacting students' intercultural communicative competence: language barriers, devoid of intercultural communicative knowledge and ethnocentrism. Accordingly the study proposed some strategies to enhance the cultivation of students' intercultural communicative competence: firstly, teachers should design more intercultural background knowledge in English teaching. Secondly, students should actively participate in intercultural communicative communication and continuously enhance their intercultural communicative awareness; thirdly, schools should provide intercultural training for teachers to improve their intercultural communication literacy.

Key words: Intercultural communicative competence; English teaching; Junior high school

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1. INTRODUCTION

Under the context of rapid globalization, English, as a lingua franca, is being widely-used and plays

an increasingly important role in international communication. People of different cultures are interacting more and more frequently in various fields, making intercultural communication a necessity for English learners. At the same time, in China, intercultural communication skills are incorporated as an integral part of the core literacy of the English language, and are listed as an important educational objective of English language teaching. In *The English Curriculum Standard for General High School* (2017), it is clearly stated that at the higher stages of English learning, students are expected to broaden their exposure to foreign cultures, thus helping them to broaden their horizons and improving their intercultural communication skills. This requires teachers to pay more attention to students' quality education in the teaching process, introduce the similarities and contrasts between Chinese and other cultures to students, create an welcoming and acceptable environment for students to communicate across cultures, and thus gradually develop an awareness of intercultural communication. So intercultural communication is of utmost important in junior high school English teaching. The purpose of this study is to investigate the current situation of junior high school students' intercultural communication competence, and find out some problems that affect intercultural communication competence cultivation for junior high school students.

2. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Intercultural communication is the exchange of information between people who come from different cultural backgrounds or speak different languages. Intercultural communication was proposed by Edward T. Hall in *The Silent Language* (1959). Therefore, Edward T. Hall is regarded as the founder of Intercultural Communication, and also the first person to utilize the

notion of intercultural communication. Afterwards, many researchers have continued to investigate the area of intercultural communication

After the 1970s, more scholars studied intercultural communication but different scholars had their unique views on the definition of intercultural communication. Condon (1975) and Brislin (1994) defined intercultural communication as effective communication between people from different cultures.

Chinese scholar Hu Wenzhong gave the definition of intercultural communication in *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication* (1999): People from different cultural backgrounds have the opportunity to come into contact more frequently and interact interculturally due to the development of the transportation and the globalization of the world. Hu also proposed five stages of communication: the emergence of language, the use of writing, the development of printing technology, the development of means of transport and communication, and intercultural communication.

Rubén (1976) considered that intercultural communication competence is the ability that an individual in a certain environment should have in order to achieve their goals, personality and expectations. Moreover, intercultural communication competence is a kind of ability that can meet people's basic requirements and achieve their goals.

Spitzberg (2000) defined intercultural communication competence more specifically: Intercultural communication competence is the inherent ability of individuals to behave appropriately and effectively in a given context and to deal with key issues in intercultural communication

3. FACTORS IMPACTING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

3.1 Language Barriers

Students' habits in learning their mother tongue will exert a substantial influence on their second language learning. Negative mother tongue transfer is detrimental to students' mastery and usage of foreign languages, and it will also make students confused between the two languages. In intercultural communication, students apply the communication patterns they are used to in their native language to communication situations in the target language. Misunderstandings during the intercultural communication will certainly arise from this negative transfer of the mother tongue. And it will also cause students to develop language barriers.

The influence of language barriers on students' intercultural communication is mainly reflected in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The most

common challenge to students' intercultural competence development is language barriers, among which negative transfer is oftentimes one of the commonly-seen factors that preclude the improvement of students' intercultural communicative competence.

3.2 Devoid of Intercultural Communicative Knowledge

The lack of intercultural communicative knowledge will barricade the development of students' intercultural communication. With the high-speed dissemination of information, students can learn about the history, geography, customs, and other aspects of English-speaking countries through media such as TV, the Internet, and books. Take junior high school English textbooks for instance, the introduction of British and American cultures are often involved. Although students are becoming more knowledgeable about the cultures of the English speaking countries, the depth and breadth of intercultural communicative knowledge that students have mastered are far from enough. Students cannot effectively acquire an understanding of intercultural communication due to a lack of knowledge across different cultures.

3.3 Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism refers to a nation's view of itself as the center of world culture, as well as its use of its own cultural behavior as a criterion against which other nations' cultural behavior is measured, and its isolation of its own culture from other cultures. Aleksy's research showed that ethnocentrism as a social phenomenon can have both positive and negative effects on relations between various ethnic groups. Aleksy also pointed out that ethnocentrism can affect intercultural communication.

Sixty-seven percent of students agree that Chinese is the most attractive and emotive language in the world, and they believe that Chinese culture is the best culture in the world. This demonstrates that students may subconsciously assume that Chinese culture is superior to that of other ethnic communities, leading to ethnocentrism in intercultural communication. This ethnocentrism often leads to misunderstandings of other cultures, obstructing the smooth flow of intercultural communication.

4. ANALYSIS ABOUT STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

4.1 Reasons for the Teachers

Firstly, some teachers believed that junior high school students face pressure from the usual academic exams in the school and the future entrance exams, so in their daily English teaching sessions, teachers tend to pay more attention to consolidating and improving students' basic language knowledge and test-taking ability through the

usual course study and various forms of tests. With the reform of the new curriculum standards, English teaching in middle school has become more and more focused on the learning of English cultural knowledge, and the new curriculum standards require that the content of cultural knowledge be continuously integrated in the daily teaching process. However, teachers tend to focus more on the language knowledge in the textbook and still use the traditional method by focusing on grammar, vocabulary and other language items, but seldom take much time to explain the cultural knowledge that goes with the text, because teachers' teaching is mainly aimed at students' the National College Entrance Exam. In addition, the teachers tend to pay more attention to students' examinations and usually assign homework such as memorizing vocabulary, phrases or doing some grammar exercises, but seldom assign homework such as checking background information and studying cultural knowledge outside the classroom.

Secondly, some English teachers lacked a systematic knowledge of English culture in terms of professional knowledge. According to the requirements of the new curriculum standards for teaching English cultural knowledge, teachers themselves must enhance their knowledge of the cultures of the language they teach and have some knowledge of intercultural communication strategies. Some teachers realize the necessity of cultivating students' intercultural communication competence, but they do not have enough intercultural communication knowledge themselves, which leads to their lack of enough intercultural communication knowledge to improve that of their students. And other teachers are still stuck in the traditional way of teaching, not paying due attention to the fact that intercultural communication competence has a subtle effect on students' development, and they cannot update their teaching modes as well, which is also one of the reasons that hinder the development of students' intercultural communication competence.

Thirdly, many teachers' classrooms are lecture-based, and students use less oral expression and are passively listening to the teachers' lectures in the classroom. Such teaching methods have a negative effect on students' intercultural communication. Teachers explain more domestic knowledge in the classrooms but less foreign geographical knowledge, customs, historical knowledge, social etiquette, and foreigners' values. Likewise, less time is spent on explaining intercultural knowledge.

4.2 Reasons for the Student

Firstly, the students thought it is absolutely necessary to learn intercultural communication knowledge, but some of the students considered it necessary to learn intercultural communication knowledge to some extent. As for students' knowledge of foreign cultures, there exist a large number of students who don't know foreign

cultures quite well. This shows that students don't have enough knowledge of intercultural communication. It leads students to ignore the importance of intercultural communication.

Secondly, it is found that high school students have heavy academic burdens. In addition to studying various subjects, students have to prepare for various exams. Therefore, students pay more attention to grammar, vocabulary, and other language knowledge in English class. Students think that test scores are an important criterion for English learning, and they often take good grades as their motivation to learn it. At the same time, teachers often neglect to explain the cultural background knowledge that appears in the text. In class, teachers focus on explaining test-related knowledge. Therefore, students do not pay attention to the study of cultural knowledge in the daily English learning process, and devote all their energy to the study of language knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary, and take examinations as a measure of English learning. This leads to students' lack of motivation to learn English cultural knowledge.

5. SUGGESTIONS FOR CULTIVATING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

5.1 Suggestions for the Teachers

As the new curriculum standards placed a greater emphasis on junior high school students' international communicative competence, teachers should pay special attention to intercultural knowledge teaching in their classrooms.

First of all, teachers should be equipped with the use of the cultural comparison method in their teaching. The cultural comparison approach is a way of comparing two cultures to find out what they have in common and what they don't. Teachers should seize the most distinctive differences between the two cultures in teaching to make comparisons, deepen students' understanding of the different cultures and promote intercultural development awareness.

Secondly, teachers should create a warm and welcoming environments where students are encouraged to speak out their minds and opinions in English classrooms. Teachers should encourage students to express their ideas and opinions boldly, instead of correcting errors immediately after the commit grammatical errors, thus allowing students to speak in complete sentences so as to improve students' self-confidence in learning and finally students really develop interests and motivation of learning English.

Thirdly, teachers should also flesh out the more ambiguous aspects of intercultural communication that students already know and motivate them to engage in

intercultural learning themselves. To do this, however, teachers need to strengthen students' subjectivity and guide them in their intercultural learning by grouping them around cultural knowledge.

Fourthly, in teaching English in junior high schools, teachers should keep abreast of times, engage in various training activities to improve their own cultural literacy and intercultural communication teaching skills, strengthen their professional development and update their teaching philosophy.

Finally, English teaching is a process, whereby teachers should take into account the overall and holistic development of their students and have a long-term plan to narrow the gaps in their students' intercultural communication competence instead of blindly pursuing short-term benefits of English teaching.

5.2. Suggestions for the Students

Intercultural communicative competence is a combination of competencies that need to be learned and applied in a conscious and planned way so that students' levels of intercultural communication competence can be improved. If students are not aware of the need to develop it, they will not only learn them in a planned way, but also deliberately avoid or ignore intercultural issues in the communication process, especially in an intercultural context. The lack of opportunities to develop intercultural communication skills constrain students' cultivation of intercultural communicative competence on the one hand, and affects their motivation to develop them on the other.

Firstly, students should be more actively involved in exploring learning tasks to promote a better understanding of cultural knowledge in English learning. Therefore, when learning English, students should approach the learning of language skills and cultures in the same way. In addition to basic language skills, the learning of relevant cultural knowledge will help students to gain a better and more comprehensive understanding of English, and grasp the cultural connotations behind the language so as to better engage in intercultural communication, and keep pace with the development of the new era.

Secondly, students should be aware that the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence cannot be entirely dependent on teachers, but should first develop their independent learning skills so that they can enrich their knowledge of intercultural communication, learn to adapt their communicative behaviors flexibly to different cultural contexts, slowly accumulate intercultural experience and promote the long-term development of intercultural communicative competence.

5.3 Suggestions for the School

Junior high schools should install evaluation systems through which teachers can pay more attention to intercultural communication teaching. Schools should provide sufficient class time and resources for English

teachers to instruct intercultural communication. Then, schools should provide training for teachers on intercultural communication teaching, and improve their teachers' professionalism and knowledge structure by holding special training sessions. Once the teachers' professionalism has been renewed, the knowledge they pass on to the students will also be updated and the students' cultural knowledge and intercultural communicative competence will be improved.

In addition, the school should provide a learning environment for the development of intercultural communicative competence. For example, by showing students a foreign film in English every week, students will be able to gain more authentic knowledge about foreign cultures, customs and traditions by piecemeal. English clubs should also be established so that students can move from being afraid to speak English to be brave enough to express themselves in English. The school should encourage students to hold weekly presentations about foreign cultures whereby students will gather a lot of knowledge about the cultures of different countries and discover the differences between Chinese and foreign cultures while preparing their presentations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The English Curriculum Standard for General High School (2017) sets intercultural communicative competence as an objective of the junior high school English curriculum and makes it clear that one of the goals of teaching English in junior high school is to improve students' intercultural communicative competence, so students should be encouraged to engage in intercultural communication in their teaching.

This study made an investigation into the current situation of junior high school students' intercultural communicative competence, analyzed the causes of the arising problems, and offered some suggestions to help junior high school students improve their intercultural communicative competence. The study revealed that the cultivation of students' intercultural communicative competence involves the interplay of the teachers, the students and the schools. For teachers, though junior high school students' awareness of intercultural communication has become stronger in recent years and their performance in intercultural communication behaviour has slightly improved, but they still lack intercultural communication knowledge. And there is still a lack of emphasis on teachers' awareness of developing students' intercultural communication skills. Teachers should expand their own intercultural professional awareness and knowledge reserves and create situations in the classroom to communicate interculturally with their students. For the students, they should enhance the intercultural awareness so that they should give equal heed to language skill

learning as well as the intercultural learning. For the schools, they should on the one hand provide the teachers opportunities to update their intercultural communication knowledge, and on the other hand provide a welcoming learning environment for the students' development of intercultural communicative competence by getting them more exposed to authentic knowledge about foreign cultures, customs and traditions.

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