

An Investigation of Non-English Majors' Intercultural Communicative Competence: Based on a Case Study of China West Normal University

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Abstract

Language, communication and culture are inseparable that one needs high level of intercultural communicative competence if he hopes to master English well. The aim of this paper is to explore Chinese non-English majors' intercultural communicative competence, especially the cognitive dimension, intercultural awareness. Some pedagogical suggestions on cultivating students' intercultural communicative competence were put forward at the end of this paper.

Key words: Culture; Cultural awareness; Intercultural communicative competence; College English teaching

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INTRODUCTION

Intercultural interactions have become part of daily life in this information era. Hereby, intercultural competence becomes a required ability for citizens in this multicultural and globalized world. Students and staff are increasingly interacting with those who may not share the same cultural and social norms. In 2007, Chinese Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China drew up College English Curriculum requirements, which acts as the national syllabus for College English in China. It indicated that College English teaching is "an integral part of higher education", and College English

is a "required basic course for undergraduate students." Besides, College English has "as its main components knowledge and practically skills of the English language, learning strategies and intercultural communication." In the Western China, which ranks the less developed region of the whole country, the college students' ability to use English is far from satisfactory. For a long period, college English teachers, especially who worked in the western part of China, pay much attention to training their students to linguistic competence, ignoring the intercultural competence. In the information ear, Globalization and technological advance enable people from different cultural backgrounds communicate with each other more frequently than before, thus the conflicts of intercultural communication occur every now and then and it results in the new challenge that our college English teaching: How to improve undergraduates' intercultural competence? How to practically solve the problems in cultivating college students' cultural awareness? Hereby, this research makes an investigation of college English Intercultural teaching practice and the current situation of non-English majors' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in China West Normal University. The results show that the current situation of their ICC is not qualified enough for a successful intercultural communication. This suggests that the students still need to enhance their ICC through language acquisition in class but at the same time, they also need to acquire more social knowledge of target culture and learn more communicating strategies. Under such circumstance, foreign language teaching should put more emphasis on students' actual strategic knowledge, cultural knowledge and their language ability as well.

1. CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

1.1 Connotation of Culture

Culture, in the view of etymology, it comes from the Latin word "colere", meaning "cultivating" and growing.

It is the exact term that has been widely employed in social science and has different shades of meaning in different disciplines and context. Edward Burnet Tylor, the forerunner of cultural anthropologists, put forward a definition of culture in his book "Primitive Culture and Anthropology" in 1871, defining it as "Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Some linguists defined culture as "the set of values and beliefs which are common with a given society" (McCarthy & Carrter, 1994), containing "a value system, habits of thought, assumptions about reality, verifiable knowledge, art forms, language, paralanguage, and kinesics"(Nostrand, 1978, see Stern, 1996). The founder of intercultural communication, Edward T. Hall, defined that culture is communication and communication is culture; in the field of foreign language education, scholar regarded culture is "with a big C and a small". Culture with a big C" focuses on "the total of a people's achievement and contributions to civilization: art, music, literature, architecture, technology, scientific discoveries and philosophy"; while culture with a small "c" indicates the behavior patterns of the life style of people (Allen & Valette, 1977).

1.2 Characteristics of Culture

The characteristics of culture can be briefly summarized as follows:

1.2.1 Culture Is Learned

The term "enculturation", which usually takes place through interaction, observation, and imitation, denotes the total activity of learning one's culture. Members of a culture have learned their patterns of behavior and ways of thinking since infancy until most of them become internalized and habitual.

1.2.2 Culture Is Systemic

As all independent system, culture consists of subsystems with specific function. It can be divided into different system according to different standards. The two broad categories, material culture and spiritual culture, are the simplest example.

1.2.3 Culture Is Dynamic

It is the accumulation in the evolution and expansion of human history. Culture cannot be formed in a short time, namely, it has certain stability when it forms; conversely, cultures are constantly being confronted with ideas and other conditions changing, in this sense, culture changed from time to time. In a word, culture is relatively stable, and its variability is absolute.

1.2.4 Culture Is Inheritable

Culture develop as a continuous process, which predecessors' knowledge, the belief, the values, the way of behavior and so forth transmit. Valdes even indicated

that if there is any break in the learning chain, culture would vanish.

In the field of foreign language education in China, culture can be classified into two levels: overt culture and covert culture. The former refers to those visible ones, such as art, architecture, village, geography, etc. which is the descriptive framework of the national cultural entirety; the latter is invisible, including custom, thought, and value, etc. and it is the cognitive orientation of the culture.

1.3 Communication

"Communicate" is the word from Latin "eommonis" that means common and share, with which "Common" and "share" are the first steps of communication. At the same time, they are also the purpose of communication. Through communication, people can gain more "shared" things in "common". Samovar and Porter (1994, p.8) defined communication in this way: "Communication is a dynamic and systemic process in which meanings are created and reflected in human interaction with symbols." It has eight ingredients: source, encoding, message, channel, receiver, decoding, receiver response and feedback. Encoding and decoding are of the special significance in intercultural communication. For instance, a message is encoded in one culture but is decoded in another, thus misunderstanding in intercultural communication took place. In brief, the characteristics of communication can be concluded that: Communication is a dynamic process, not only symbolic but also systematic, both synchronic and diachronic.

2. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Lustig and Koester (1993) had given a more comprehensive definition of intercultural communication is "a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which the degree of difference between people is large and important enough to create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about what are regarded as competent behaviors that should be used to create shared meanings". The aim of intercultural communication is to enable people from different cultures to understand each other and to reach more "common" and "share", to eliminate the obstacles in the process.

Communicative competence was firstly put forward by American anthropologist and sociolinguist Dell Hymes in his book *On Communicative competence* in 1972. The term "communicative competence" used here to contrast to Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence. Hyme emphasized that developing the language abilities within cultural contexts of the target language and culture. Intercultural competence involves the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures (Perry & Southwell, 2011). According to Lusting and Koester (2006), intercultural competence is related to the following dimensions: Knowledge, motivation, skills

and behaviors. Arasaratnam (2009) defined Intercultural communicative competence as “the ability to effectively and appropriately communicate with people from different cultures”. The following five particular qualities are included: Empathy, intercultural experience/training, motivation, global attitude and ability to listen well in conversation are related to intercultural communicative competence.

As the cognitive dimension of Intercultural Communicative Competence, Intercultural awareness refers to one’s capacity to understand similarities and differences of other cultures. It is comprised of two elements: self-awareness and cultural awareness (Chen & Starosta, 1998). Intercultural awareness provides us with an opportunity to understand cultural dynamics hence reduce situational ambiguity and uncertainty brought by intercultural communication. Therefore, understanding cultural variability can help people understand why people from different cultural communities behave differently in their ways of communication (Chen, 2009). Because the different information processing results in misunderstanding in the intercultural communication. In this paper, the focus was put on the cognitive dimension of intercultural communicative competence, that is, the purpose of the paper is to investigate non-English majors’ intercultural awareness.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study tries to answer the following questions:

- a) What is college students’ attitude towards culture and cultural learning?
- b) What is the current situation of the non-English majors’ intercultural communicative competence in general?
- c) Do Chinese non-English majors have the intercultural awareness?

This research takes non-English major students as research objects. It utilizes a questionnaire to do the survey. 100 non-English majors from China West Normal University had participated in this study. They were majors of politics, mathematics and computer science and technology. After finishing the questionnaire, 15 students were invited to do an interview one by one. Participants’ options were collected and analyzed with the help of Microsoft Excel.

The questionnaire comprises of five parts. Part 1 (Table 1) is the information of Students Participants.

Table 1
Information of Students Participants

item	Students participants
Age	
Gender	
Major	
Years of learning English	
Experience of being aboard	

Part 2 is related to the connotation of culture, students are required to make an option among “very important”, “important” and “not important” according to their own understanding.

Part 3 is to survey their interests in the culture of the five major English speaking countries, including the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Participants are required to make a choice among “very interested”, “maybe interested” and “not interested”.

Part 4 is to investigate students’ attitude and intercultural awareness, and their perceptions on cultural learning and teaching.

These questions of multiple choices were designed with a five-point Likert scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. It is also related to students’ source of getting cultural information. They were provided with 8 items about the way they get information source and required to select three dimensions from “often”, “sometimes” and “never”.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The test of questionnaire was carried out to 100 non-English majors in China West Normal University in September 2016. The participants were convinced that their marks would only be used for scientific research and have no relationship with their term scores.

The first part is about the participants’ personal information. It indicates that most of them have been learning English for 10 years. Although they have learnt English language for a long period, their understanding about intercultural communication differ from person to person.

4.1 Understanding of Culture Connation

Part 2 in the questionnaire is about the connation and definition of culture. The 9 selections, including:

- a) Literature and arts; media, movie
- b) Family life, interpersonal relationship
- c) Traditional culture and custom
- d) People’s daily life and their work and entertainment
- e) Eating habit and dressing
- f) History
- g) Politics
- h) Religion
- i) People’s belief and attitude.

Students are required to select among the three scales “very important”, “important” and “not important”.

Figure 1 showed that some participants had a misunderstanding of culture in terms of “religion” and “People’s daily life, their work and entertainment”. For most Chinese people, especially the Han People, who are atheistic, they cannot understand the importance of religion’s profound effect on westerners’ life and culture. Moreover, culture derives from life and people’s daily life

such as the way they work and live, their entertainment can embody culture connotation. This results indicates that many students conceptualize culture in a superficial

way, ignoring the authentic meaning of culture. Namely, students have an ambiguous connotation about culture and culture study.

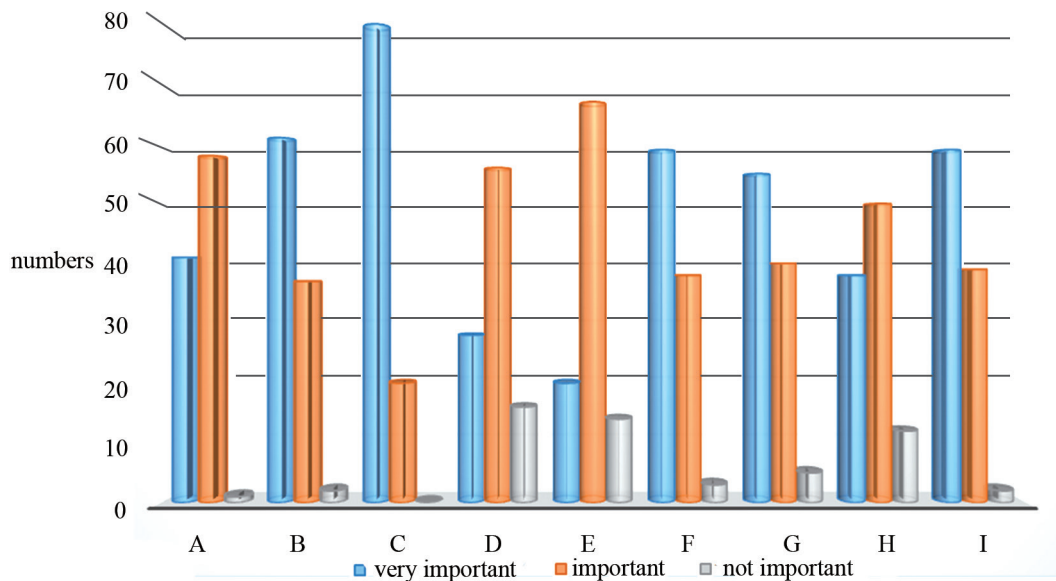


Figure 1
Understanding of Culture Connotation and Definition

4.2 Interests in the Culture of English-Speaking Countries

Table 2 shows participants' interests in these English-speaking countries.

Table 2
Students Interests in English-Speaking Countries

Nations	Very interested	Maybe interested	Uninterested	Not marked
USA	43, 45.26%	39, 41.05%	8, 8.42%	5
UK	59, 61.45%	35, 36.46%	2, 2.08%	4
Canada	17, 18.48%	55, 59.78%	20, 21.74%	8
Australia	34, 36.56%	46, 49.46%	12, 12.90%	7
New Zealand	36, 37.89%	39, 41.05%	20, 21.05%	5

Clearly, the United Kingdom (61.45%) is the most favorite nation among all the selected ones, followed by the United States (45.25%), New Zealand (37.89%), Australia (36.56%) and Canada (18.48%). It indicates that, on the whole, participants didn't show much interests in cultures of English-speaking countries. The narrow field of vision and narrow range of knowledge do impede their cultural learning. The researcher was told in the following interview that they are indeed interested in cultures of these culture, they know nothing about cultures in Canada or New Zealand, which was rarely mentioned in the English textbooks.

4.3 Understanding of Culture Learning

The data from items about students' belief on culture learning shows that over 75% participants think that cultural learning is "very important" for it helps them to understand the English language and intercultural communication. In all, they are eager to get more cultural input.

Whether culture learning will reduce English learning interests

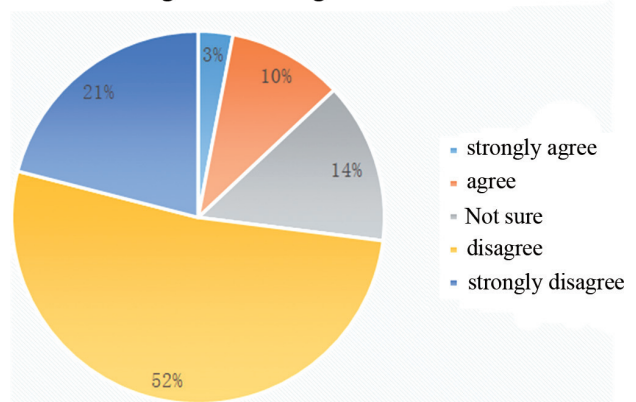


Figure 2
Culture Learning Will Reduce My Interests in English Language Learning

Specific, Item 58 is about "learning the culture of English-speaking country will reduce my interests in

English language learning". Figure 2 reveals that almost half of the participants hold an ambiguous attitude towards culture learning although they have realized that cultural learning is of great importance. In the following interview, some students mentioned that although they

were interested in learning western culture, culture knowledges were seldom involved in the English tests, such as CET4, CET6. Passing these tests are the main motivation for their college English learning.

4.3 Grammar and Culture Learning

Figure 3 shows students' attitudes towards grammar learning.

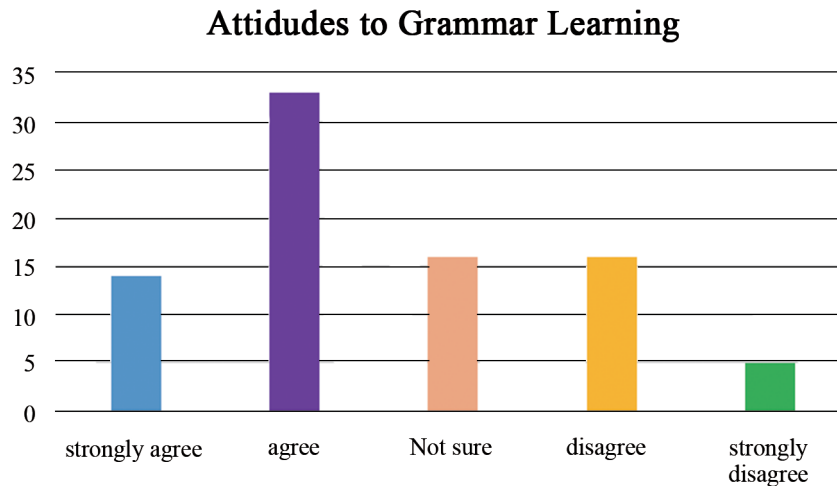


Figure 3
Grammar Learning Is the Core of English Language Learning

Most participants in this research hold that grammar is the key part in English language learning. Grammar, which was overemphasized in high school teaching, had affected Chinese students a lot. Students admitted that in their past ten years' English learning experiences,

grammar is always core part that be emphasized by their high school teachers. To help students get the high score in examinations, English teachers in China pay special attention to grammar teaching. Therefore, grammar is attached great importance by students.

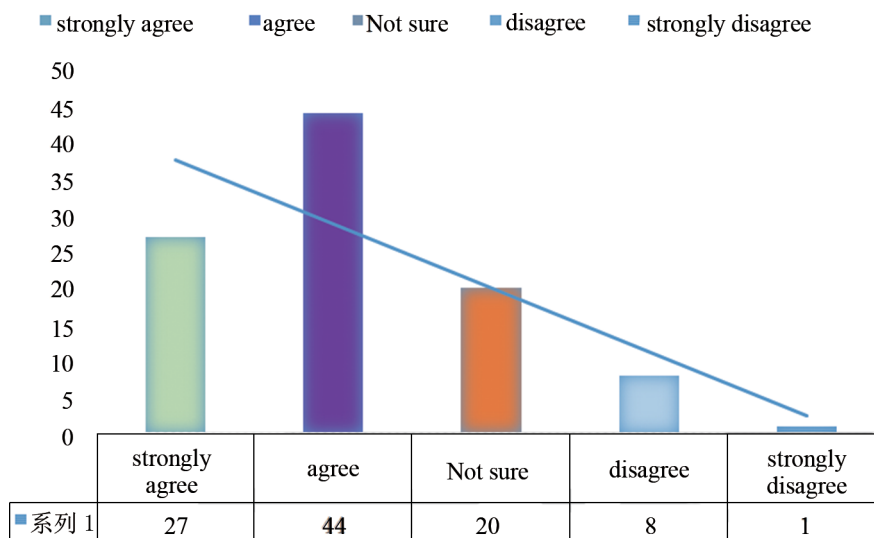


Figure 4
Grammar Is Not the Barrier to Effective Intercultural Communication

As for the statement whether grammar is the barrier to effective intercultural communication, Figure 4 illustrates that 71% students believe that grammar had no connection with effective communication, only one students hold

the opposite views, the other 20% students show their ambiguous attitude it. All the data indicate that although students conceptualized intercultural communication properly, they lack the knowledge about intercultural

communication. They believe grammar learning is the key part in English learning on the one hand, they deny its function in intercultural communication on the other hand.

CONCLUSION

(a) Major Findings

From the above survey, it is not difficult to find out that non-English majors in this study lack not only competence of intercultural communication but also sensitivity and awareness. Obviously, many non-English majors do not know the exact meaning of culture although they understand its importance in language learning. From these questionnaires and investigations in this research, there are still some limitations of the intercultural communicative teaching of the non-English majors in the college as well as the intercultural communicative competence of non-English majors should be improved. The textbooks merely reached in the field of intercultural communication, as a result, the students cannot get enough information of the intercultural communicative competence from the textbooks, college English teachers also cannot help students gain much intercultural communication knowledge using these textbooks. And students hope to get the promotion of linguistic performance in the meantime of their promotion of intercultural communicative competence.

(b) Pedagogical Implications

Intercultural awareness is a cognitive dimension of intercultural competence, which refers to a person's ability to understand similarities and differences of other cultures. Researchers argue that cultural knowledge alone does not lead to intercultural competence. Students must critically examine culture, not just accumulate facts and knowledge about a culture, to develop intercultural competence. Bennett (2009) argues that: a) language learning may not be sufficient for culture learning; b) disequilibrium need not lead to dissatisfaction (and thus an attempt to learn); c) cultural contact does not necessarily lead to competence and d) cultural contact does not always lead to significant reduction of stereotypes.

With our societies become more multicultural, the national educational systems are increasingly calling for the development of intercultural competence as a desirable outcome. To cultivate students' awareness of intercultural communication, the following suggestions are put forward:

Firstly, students should realize that cultural differences in intercultural communication do exist. As an English learner, to be aware of the differences between cultures is the first step for any successful intercultural communication. English learners should not only know there are cultural differences in intercultural communication but also accept the fact.

Secondly, barriers to effective intercultural communication such as ethnocentrism, stereotype should be avoided. Ethnocentrism mainly refers to the belief that one's culture is primary to all explanations of reality (Samovar & Porter, 2004). In intercultural communication, it is necessary to realize that every nation's culture is equal and no culture is superior to others. Otherwise, it is too difficult to tolerate the different behaviors of other cultures.

Thirdly, non-English majors in China West Normal University have four classes a week with 40 minutes each class. Time is quite limited in class, so students need to do more activities to improve their intercultural communication competence after class. Reading extensively for cultural knowledge, watching English movies or TV are recommended. Researchers abroad prove that attending a culturally diverse school has the potential to develop students' intercultural competence. For our students, who live in the remote area of China, that possibility is little. If possible, communicate with native speakers for it is the direct and effective way to practice authentic intercultural communication.

As for college English teachers, they should assist in the acquisition of intercultural communication competence. Firstly, they should realize the importance of culture's role in language learning. The ultimate purpose of college English intercultural teaching is to cultivate students' intercultural communicative competence. However, for years, basic language skills like listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation have taken the dominant role in language teaching, knowledge involved in culture and intercultural competence seldom was emphasized. Therefore, English teachers need to strengthen their intercultural communicative competence and diversify their teaching method. Namely, through building appropriate environment of culture learning, various approaches like role-play, comparison and contrast, audio-visual approaches, and outside-class activities can be used to arouse students' learning interests so as to make them learn cultural knowledge effectively during their participating in these activities, which is beneficial to improve their intercultural communicative competence. Second, the method of grasping cultural information from the teaching materials can be used to cultivate the sensitivity to cultural factors and to improve their intercultural awareness.

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