

Constructing Intercultural Communicative Competence Framework for English Learners

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Abstract

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is an area of research that has tremendous pragmatic potential. Many teachers and English learners have noticed that English education is both instrumental and humanistic in nature. Thus, the ultimate goal of English teaching is intended to cultivate the intercultural communicative competence. This goal has gathered a widespread attention. Thus, to study intercultural communicative competence is of great significance in the field of intercultural communication. However, the research on this competence is limited. Thus, an effective training framework is yet to be constructed. There is no universally agreed-upon definition of intercultural communicative competence. Therefore, the present review is intended to introduce the framework of intercultural communicative competence in College English. In this review, we will pay attention to what intercultural communicative competence is and how to construct intercultural communicative competence framework for English learners, which may be useful for English learners to communicate more effectively with people from other cultures.

Key words: Intercultural communicative competence; Framework; English learners

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1. BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

And the history of intercultural communication is very long. It dates back to thousands of years ago. A long time ago, when people started intermingling with each other, when people were having trade relations with others, there were intercultural communications. A very good example is the “silk road”. A lot of traders from different countries interacted with each other in their business reactions. There was intercultural communication.

However, intercultural communication as a discipline first started in the United States. A book named *Silent language* which was written by Edward Hall and published in 1959 is believed by some as the beginning of the intercultural communication. That book had since become a classic of the intercultural communication studies.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Intercultural communication as a phenomenon is really universal and it takes place everywhere. In the US, people came from many countries in the world. They came from Africa, Europe, Asia and Australia. These immigrants came to the United States and had to communicate with each other, so there was a lot of chance of intercultural communication. And the now immigrant also arrive every year by the millions. Large numbers of foreign students and tourist also come to the United States. At a typical American campus, we'll find students from different parts of the world. Therefore, intercultural communication is very common.

Besides, there is globalization of world economy. In the 21st century, the rapid development of science and technology, the widening world markets and the globalization of the world economy all require people to be able to appreciate, understand, communicate and work interculturally. There are many multi-national companies with employees and offices around the world in the US. These employees who come from different cultural backgrounds communicate with others who have different cultures. However, intercultural communication as a discipline has a fairly short history.

When it comes to English learners in China, it is much more important. Since 1979, China has been opening up to the outside world. The policy made it possible for us to enjoy the fruits of developments of science and technology. Many multinational companies invested in China and even moved their head offices to China. Meanwhile, Chinese enterprises are also doing business around the world. The cultural element will have played a more important role in the new century. Accordingly, economic developments, globalization of the world economy and its current cooperation of different countries demand people who are capable of intercultural communication as well as professional expertise. And intercultural communicative competence is the key to successful intercultural communication.

In the recent years, more and more Chinese students are going to English-speaking countries to further their studies. Thus, in China, English as a school subject is becoming increasingly more important. Intercultural communication sometimes breaks down in real-life conversations, not because of the non-native speaker's errors in syntax, or their inaccurate pronunciation in the target language, but because of their pragmatic incompetence, which leads to pragmatic failure. In other words, they may be unable to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context. In intercultural communication, some English learners may know the literal meaning of an utterance, but may fail to understand its contextual meaning, or fail to accurately understand the speaker's intended force.

In intercultural communication, being unaware of each other's respective social and cultural tradition, the interlocutors may participate in the communication with their own cultural values and use their own cultural systems to interpret the new situations they experience.

As a result, in foreign language teaching, intercultural communication is very important. It is important for improving general cultural awareness.

3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: A FRAMEWORK

The notion of intercultural communicative competence originated from Hymes' communicative competence.

The idea of intercultural communicative competence is important to foreign language teaching which is widely accepted now. However, there searchers do not reach agreement on what specifically intercultural communicative competence is and what it comprises. The components of intercultural communicative competence are still open to discussion. Many researchers have explored intercultural communicative competence with their own understandings.

According to Spitzberg, intercultural communicative competence encompasses skills, motivation, and knowledge. Skills refer to our abilities to engage in the behaviors necessary to communicate effectively and appropriately. Motivation is our desire to communicate effectively and appropriately with others. Knowledge refers to our awareness or understanding of what needs to be done in order to communicate effectively and appropriately. In real situations, there might be the cases in which someone may be highly motivated but lack the knowledge of the skills. Even if we are motivated and have the knowledge and skills, this does not necessarily mean that we will communicate effectively. Therefore, there are some other factors, such as emotional factors, environmental factors that may affect our behavior in addition to skills, motivation and knowledge.

Fantini regarded that ICC is not simply about learning to view the world through other people's eyes. Instead, intercultural communicative competence is a complex phenomenon with multiple components. These components include: (a) A variety of characteristics or traits; (b) Three areas or domains; (c) Four dimensions; (d) Proficiency in a second language. He has been emphasizing the appropriateness of language which means language must meet specific social and cultural context.

Similarly, according to Williams and Bonita, there are three vital components to developing cultural competence. They are as follows (i) self-knowledge/awareness; (ii) experience and knowledge about a particular culture; (iii) positive change or action for successful interaction with the identified culture. Kim regards that communicative competence comprises of three levels: cognitive level, affective level and behavioral or per formative level. Samovar and Porter explored the importance of intercultural communicative competence from the perspective of the potential communication problems in intercultural communication and they think that a competent intercultural communicator should be one who is motivated, has a fund of knowledge to draw upon and possess certain communication skills. That is to say, intercultural communicative competence is comprised of three dimensions: motivation, knowledge and skill. It is obviously shown that the intercultural communicative competence at least comprises of three dimensions: motivation, knowledge and skill. Context plays an important role in intercultural communication, with more understanding about the context. The interlocutor can

easily overcome the difficulties and grasp more abilities of being an effective communicator. Therefore, college English teaching should not just attempt to provide representations of other cultures, but should concentrate on equipping Non-English major students with the means of accessing and analyzing any cultural practices and meanings they encounter.

Kim, a well-known expert on intercultural communication, in her book *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural*, put forward a new theoretical framework of intercultural communicative competence incorporating the research findings of many disciplines such as anthropology, social psychology, linguistics and sociology. According to Kim, intercultural communicative competence is the overall internal capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: namely, cultural differences and unfamiliarity, inter-group posture, and the accompanying experience of stress. And intercultural communicative competence comprises of three dimensions cognitive dimension, affective dimension and behavioral or performative dimension. There are different patterns of performance in each dimension. The three dimensions are shown in the following diagram.

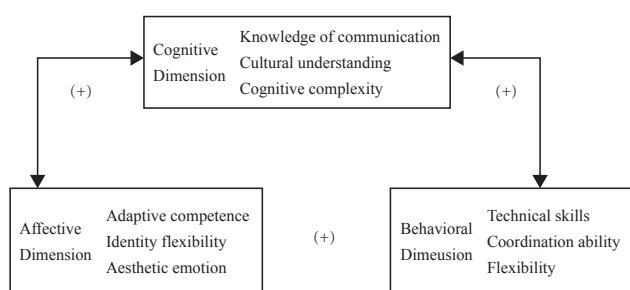


Figure 1
Intercultural Communicative Competence Framework

3.1 Cognitive Dimension

The cognitive dimension refers to the explanatory ability for the language and non-language behaviors. Cognitive dimension is the knowledge dimension of ICC, which involves such knowledge of the target language and culture. The knowledge of the target language goes beyond linguistics- phonetics, syntax and vocabulary- to include the pragmatic use of the language in everyday life. The knowledge of pragmatic rules ranges from the knowledge of cooperative principle, speech-act theory to the knowledge of cohesion and coherence and so on. Hence, the knowledge of language includes a linguistic component (forms and grammar of language), a sociolinguistic dimension (style appropriate for different situations) and a pragmatic dimension (pragmatic rules). The knowledge of culture incorporates the degree of familiarity with understanding of the target culture's historical background, its tradition customs, beliefs,

values, etc. Those who have more complex cognition tend to have a greater capacity to acquire understanding of the different cultures than those who have less complex cognition.

3.2 Affective Dimension

Kim suggested that the affective dimension refers to the motivation and the attitude of intercultural communication and the readiness to accommodate the intercultural challenges. Affective competence facilitates cross-cultural adaptation by providing an emotional and motivational capacity of dealing with the various challenges of cross-cultural exchanges. It has something to do with how communicators regulate their feelings and emotions to make intercultural communication easier. The affective dimension includes adaptive competence, identity flexibility and aesthetic emotion. Empathy ability is the ability to think the same thoughts and feel the same emotions as people from the other cultures. While aesthetic emotion is deeper than empathy ability which means whether in intercultural communication the communicative acts meet the target culture's habits.

3.3 Behavioral Dimension

Behavioral dimension is closely linked with cognitive and affective dimension. The behavioral dimension refers to the action of intercultural communication, containing abilities to be flexible and resourceful in actually carrying out what he or she is capable of in the cognitive and affective dimensions. The behavioral competence is the communicators' capacity of enacting or expressing their cognitive and affective experience outwardly, when communicating begins. Therefore, communicators' behavioral competence is based on their cognitive and affective competence. Kim categorizes these skills into the following three types: technical skills incorporate language skills, job skills, and other skills, coordination ability, flexibility. The above three dimensions of intercultural communicative competence intertwine with each other to form the one's intercultural communicative competence.

A person's affective dimension of intercultural communicative competence can affect his or her cognitive dimension of intercultural communicative competence. At the same time, the person's cognitive dimension of intercultural communicative competence can influence his or her behavioral dimension of intercultural communicative competence. Then the behavioral aspects of intercultural communicative competence can also have an impact on the person's affective dimension of intercultural communicative competence. It is important to note that the competent intercultural communication requires all three dimensions. As communicators try to come up with a mental plan for action, they must base the decision on their cultural and linguistic knowledge, as well as their motivation of the target culture.

4. HOW TO IMPROVE THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF ENGLISH LEARNERS

Because language and culture are inseparable, learning a foreign language well means not only mastering the pronunciation, grammar, words and idioms but also means learning the ways in which their language reflects the ideas, customs, and behavior of their society, and learning to understand their “language of the mind”. Thus in order to get a better understanding of the customs of other cultures, Non-English major students should be placed in the process of culture learning. However, the models mentioned above talked about culture teaching respectively on language teaching, none of them give specific learning tasks in the process of culture learning, hence these models lack feasibility in the teaching process. In communicating with foreigners, native speakers tend to be rather tolerant of errors in pronunciation or syntax. In contrast violations of rules of speaking are often interpreted as bad manners. Although scholars take varied perspectives in understanding intercultural communicative competence, its common features are veiled. Intercultural communicative competence is a context-specific concept. The context refers to not only the communication situation but also the cultural background. In order to help Non-English major students overcome the natural barriers in intercultural communication, the cultural context or background should be incorporated into the whole process of language teaching. Thus, a new culture teaching model—“Cultural Experience” is proposed.

Hymes (1972) pointed out “If we give the meaning of a new word, either by translation into the native language or by an equivalent in the same language, we weaken the impression which the word makes on the mind.” Therefore, explanation is discouraged, and the Non-English major students are expected to deduce the explanation of the meaning or the structure. In order to stimulate the Non-English major student’s intercultural interest in target culture, College English teachers should not only explain the meaning, the structures of the words but also provide several of situations for the Non-English major students to practice the norms of the culture. The real-life intercultural circumstances are more complex than the situations provided in classroom. Therefore, in order to improve the Non-English major students’ intercultural communicative competence. A variety of contexts should be provided in college English classroom for them to practice the abstract norms or skills.

The constructivist school led by Vygotsky (1984) held the idea that learners, reflecting on their own experiences, construct meanings or their own understanding and knowledge of the world individually. Constructivist theory of learning is often articulated in contrast with the behaviorist model which centers on students’ efforts

to accumulate knowledge of the natural world and on teachers’ efforts to transmit it. Behaviorist model of learning relies on a transmission. Suchman (1988) describes her perspective on the behavioral model as “Classes are usually driven by ‘teacher-talk’ and depend heavily on textbooks for the structure of the course”. Teachers serve as pipelines and seek to transfer their thoughts and meanings to the passive student. There is little room for student-initiated questions, independent thought or interaction between students. The goal of the learner is to regurgitate the accepted explanation or methodology instructed by the teacher.” Central to constructivism is its conception of learning. Constructivists view learning as the result of mental construction and the process where individuals construct new ideas or concepts based on their prior knowledge and experiences. The previous experience and prior knowledge influence knowledge which the learners will construct from new learning experiences.

From above quotations, it can be seen that learning is an active process rather than passive acceptance of knowledge which exists “out there”. In constructivist classrooms, learners become the center which is in sharp contrast to the learner’s role as the passive receiver of the transmitted knowledge in the traditional classrooms. In the whole process, the learner interacts with objects and events and then gains an understanding of the features held by such objects or events. Therefore, learners’ autonomy and initiative are encouraged and stimulated.

In constructivist classrooms teachers are coordinators, and guides. They don’t take the role of the “sage on the stage”, rather, they act as guides on the side who provide students with opportunities to test the adequacy of their current understandings. Effective learning always requires two elements: student understanding and student engagement. Therefore, in college English teaching, Non-English major students should be given opportunities to construct culture knowledge through their own experiences, rather than told by College English teacher. It is acknowledged that intercultural communicative competence is an integrated, multi-dimensional concept. It comprises affective dimension and behavioral dimension in addition to the cognitive dimension. In traditional college English classroom only some cognitive dimension-related cultural norms or protocol imparted to the Non-English Major students, while, the behavioral or affective dimension-related knowledge is less emphasized or even ignored. However, these generalized culture norms don’t guarantee the success of communication. Therefore, in college English teaching, it is unacceptable to provide the Non-English major students with some ready-made culture norms or communication protocol. Constructivism emphasizes the importance of context in learning; they hold the idea that much of what is learned is influenced by the situation in which it is learned.

According to the Constructivism, learning is the activity in which learners based on their previous experience to create new understanding for themselves.

Therefore, constructivists encourage learners to participate actively, in the whole learning process rather than receive information passively, based on the constructivist point of view. In order to improve the Non-English major students' intercultural communicative competence, College English teachers should consider the importance of context in the whole language learning process. Simultaneously, provide the Non-English major students with plenty of intercultural communicative context, and guide them to experience the intercultural communicative context, to make their own interpretation of cultural phenomenon and judgment. That is to say to construct their own understanding of intercultural communication through their own efforts.

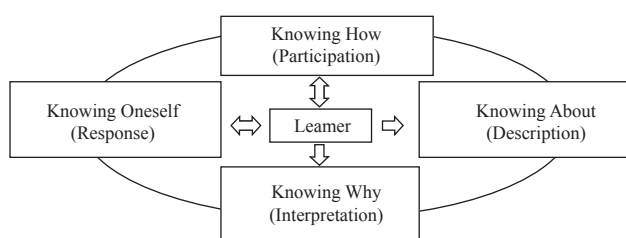


Figure 2
Cultural Experience Model for English Learners

CONCLUSION

It should be pointed out that in order to successfully interact with people from other cultures, we have to understand our own and others' cultural values, norms, customs and social systems. English teachers should integrate the target culture into English learning, not only including values, beliefs, customs and behaviors of the English-speaking countries, but also the cultural connotations of words, phrases and idioms. It's important to know and appreciate intercultural communicative competence to make our knowledge, behavior and mind

keep pace with the speed of the development of culture. In brief, it is teachers' responsibility to expose the students to the English culture as much and often as possible and help them to acquire intercultural communicative competence.

In college English teaching, teachers should consciously encourage students to experience the culture which related to linguistic knowledge, and guide students from unconscious cultural experience into conscious cultural experience. Some activities, such as information gap, interview, brainstorming, problem solving, debating and role-play can be arranged in the classroom. These activities focus on what is being done and how it is done rather than learning linguistic knowledge, thus improving the non-English major students' intercultural communicative competence.

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