

An Empirical Study on the Intercultural Communicative Competence of Chinese EFL College Students

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Abstract

Through a questionnaire survey of 100 English majors and non-English majors in North China Electric Power University, this study explores the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of Chinese EFL students at the tertiary level. The questions in the questionnaire are designed around three key points concerning the ICC: intercultural knowledge, intercultural awareness and ICC. The correlation between the ICC, the academic achievement, and other relevant factors has been examined. The results of the data analysis show that: (1) all students have a considerable amount of intercultural knowledge, have developed keen awareness of cultural differences, and are equipped with a relatively high level of ICC; (2) there is a positive correlation between their academic achievements and their ICC; (3) factors of international experience, gender and major have some effects on students' ICC. Students with international experience tend to have a better intercultural performance, and so do the female students and English majors.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, intercultural knowledge, intercultural awareness, Chinese EFL college students

1. Introduction

Globalization has resulted in profound interaction and integration of different countries and cultures, and it has also made people realize that culture gaps exist among different individuals, societies, nations and countries. Communication between people from different cultures requires intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Mastery of the language needed for cross-cultural communication does not necessarily and automatically bridge the gaps between cultures. 40 successive years of English teaching in China, ever since the reform and opening up policy in 1970s, has improved the overall English proficiency of the EFL learners at all levels, which can be evidenced by the national College English Tests Band 4 (CET-4) and Band 6 (CET-6). Does the improvement of English proficiency mean simultaneous improvement of the ICC of the students? Are the English learners in China equipped with adequate ICC when they finish all the required English courses for English learning at the tertiary level?

One of the tasks in English teaching is to enrich the EFL students' social and cultural knowledge of the English speaking countries, raise their awareness of the cultural differences, and develop their ICC. However, Chen (2013) observed that most students treat English just as a required course in college. Their English learning is usually assessed by the CET-4 and CET-6. The students' ICC has never been taken into account in the assessment of the students' English learning.

This study is intended to ascertain the current state of the students' ICC, by a questionnaire survey of the EFL students in North China Electric Power University (NCEPU). The respondents in the survey are both English majors and non-English majors. Comparative studies are made to examine the differences between English majors and non-English majors, and to observe the correlations between the students' English proficiency, their ICC and the influencing factors of ICC.

2. Theoretical Framework for the Study

In an investigation into the ICC of the EFL college students, the foremost thing to do is to define the concepts of culture, cultural difference, intercultural communication, and intercultural communicative competence. Culture can mean anything created by human beings, material, spiritual or ideological. In our context, we define culture as the ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, etc. that guide and control our behavior in our communication with others. Culture is collectively and historically built up, passed down from generation to generation, and observed by the people living in it. In our study, we emphasize the values, beliefs, norms, and attitudes that underlie our communicative behaviors.

Intercultural communication refers to social interactions between people from different cultures. These people are programmed by their own culture. Intercultural communication of EFL students refers to the interaction of EFL college students with foreigners, especially foreigners from the English speaking countries, using English and observing the underlying cultural values of the English speaking community.

The concept of competence has something to do with the concept of linguistic competence put forward by Chomsky (1965), which is coupled with linguistic performance. Linguistic competence refers to the grammatical rules internalized by ideal native speakers. Later, Hymes (1979) argued that the concept of linguistic competence cannot adequately cover the capacity of speakers when they use a language in the real situation of social

communication, and hence he initiated another concept, “communicative competence,” which includes a language user’s social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately, as well as grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and the like.

ICC refers to the ability to conduct successful intercultural communication in an international or multicultural environment. Although different scholars have different ideas of ICC, it is generally acknowledged that effectiveness and appropriateness are two common factors used in the definition of ICC. For instance, Spitzberg (2000) defines ICC as the communicator’s proper performance and effective behavior in specific context of intercultural communication. Gao Yihong (2000) maintains that ICC refers to the ability or quality needed in successful intercultural communication. Bi Jiwan (1998) thinks that ICC is the comprehensive ability of language ability, non-verbal skills, cross-cultural understanding and adaptability in intercultural communication.

Chinese scholars have conducted some research on the ICC of EFL students. Yang (2009) discussed the components of ICC. Gao (2006) investigated the current situation of students’ ICC and the existent problems in the development of ICC. And Wang (2012) and Chen (2013) explored ICC instruction teaching, based on intercultural communication.

The study and analysis of the research done so far on the ICC of Chinese EFL students contributes to the formulation of the theoretical framework for the design of the questions in the questionnaire of this study. Byram’s (2014) model is especially useful and helpful, which consists of attitude, knowledge, skills and critical cultural awareness. In his model, attitude is the core of ICC. Jia (1997) reviewed relevant literature and classified the components of ICC into four systems: the basic communication system, emotion and relationship system, plot system and communication strategy system. Each of the four systems can be subdivided into several subsystems, while the subsystems can be further subdivided. Jia’s theory is too complicated to be adopted as an operational framework.

After a thorough review and careful examination of the theories and models on ICC, we can arrive at the conclusion that the tripartite approach adopted by Gao (2002) from the perspective of psychology might be the most appropriate for the study of the ICC of the EFL college students. In this framework, ICC is perceived from three perspectives: cognition, emotion, and behavior. Cognition mainly concerns the intercultural knowledge and awareness of the EFL college students; emotion includes uncertainty, avoidance, flexibility, empathy and suspension, judgment; behavior is the ability to solve problems, build relationship and finish tasks in intercultural environment. Gao believes that this model provides a comprehensive framework for ICC from the psychological dimension.

The respondents in this survey are 100 EFL students of first- and second-year students from North China Electric Power University. The reason for the selection of the freshmen and the sophomore is that the non-English majors have no English class in the third year and correlations cannot be conducted if comparison is to be made between the English majors and non-English majors.

The questionnaire is designed based on the work by Chen Guiqin (2013). The first part is about respondents’ basic information including such items as gender, grade, CET-4 and CET-6 score and other personal information. This part aims to find out whether the mentioned factors have some correlation with their ICC. The second part is composed of the above-mentioned three aspects of the ICC: the intercultural communicative (IC) knowledge, the IC awareness and ICC. The first section in the second part (items 1 to 12) is multiple choice questions, intended to measure the level of students’ IC knowledge in certain cross-cultural communication contexts. The second and third sections in this part include values, religion, non-verbal language, global awareness, mode and strategy of communication, etc., aiming to evaluate the students’ IC awareness and ICC. These two sections adopt the form of the Likert-type scale, which reflects the students’ favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the statements.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Basic Information and Overall Data

110 copies of the questionnaire were delivered to first- and second-year students (each grade 55 copies) in NCEPU to be completed in their spare time, and 101 copies were collected with 100 being valid. Of the 100 respondents, 38 were English majors, 62 Non-English majors; 39 male students, and 61 female students.

From the analysis of the data collected from the first part of the questionnaire, *Basic Information*, we got the following results: (1) Among 100 respondents, 17% of the students are from rural areas, 57% from suburbs and small towns, and 26% from urban area. (2) 19% of the students have the experience of travelling or studying abroad. (3) 29% of them have passed the CET-4, and 16% have passed the CET-6. (4) 21% of the students have never communicated with a foreigner; 59% have communicated with foreigners occasionally; 15% of them can communicate with foreigners quite often; and 5% have frequent chances to communicate with foreigners. (5) 62% of the students are willing to communicate with foreigners, and 28% are unwilling to communicate with foreigners. The rest 10% are neither willing nor unwilling, or have never tried communicating with foreigners.

3.2 IC Knowledge, IC Awareness and ICC

The first section in the second part of the questionnaire is a small test on students' IC knowledge. There are 12 questions in this section, among which, 6 questions are about communication etiquette, two questions about different values, one question about non-verbal communication, two questions about ways of expression, and one question about sense of time. For instance, Question 1 is about the etiquette in communication with ladies: When you ask about the age of a Western lady, she would: A. Reluctantly tells you. B. Angry. C. Uncomfortable. The age of a lady is a very sensitive topic in daily conversation in Western cultures. From the response of the respondents to the question, we will learn if they have this knowledge. Question 3 has something to do with the value issue in the education of children: Children in Western countries go out to live independently when they are 18 years old. What do you think? A. Lack of family care. B. Cultivating children's ability to live independently. C. Pursuing liberalization. It is the Chinese tradition for children to live with the parents even after they grow up or get married. This question is designed to detect the understanding of the value of the idea of independence education. Question 9 is intended to test the respondents' knowledge of English expressions: -- "Your English is very good." -- "Oh, very poor, very poor." This dialogue shows: A. The speaker is good at praise. B. The answer is modest. C. The answer is inappropriate. In Chinese culture, if someone praises your beautiful language, the customary reply to the praise should be modest by denying the complimentary remark. (With the influence of the Western cultures, the Chinese way of responding to complimentary remarks is changing.)

The results of the analysis of this section indicate that the average score of students' IC knowledge is 9.01. Nearly 64% of the students' IC knowledge scores are above the average level. 49% of scores are between 8 to 10, 30% scores between 6 to 8, and 14% scores between 10 to 12.

The second section of the second part of the questionnaire was designed with the Likert-type scale, intended to understand the IC awareness of the EFL students. There are altogether 13 statements in this part. The content includes communicate etiquette, values, non-verbal language, communicate strategy, global consciousness, cultural compatibility, etc. Each statement is accompanied by a graded-response rating scale from 1 to 5. To score the scale, this category adopts positive statements. The response choices are given weights of 1 to 5 to reflect respondents' IC awareness, 1 for one point and 5 for five points. The total points are 65. A few examples will show the overall picture of the questions. For instance, Question 2 in this section: I can accept Westerners' custom of kissing as a greeting. Question 3: American people advocate individualism, and Chinese people advocate collectivism. And Question 5: Foreigners often use nonverbal behaviors (such as gestures, facial expressions, etc.) to express what they want to say.

The collected data indicate that the average score is 49.23 with the highest score 65 and the lowest 30. 54% of the respondents score above the average level. 47% are between 40 to 50, 38% are between 50 to 60, 11% below 40, and 4% above 60.

The third section of the second part concerns the ICC of the EFL college students. This part also uses the form of the Likert-type scale. There are 15 statements in this part and the total points are 75. The content includes not only those that are listed above in the second section, but also language competence, social customs and actual Communicative behavior, aiming to gather information about their ICC. Here are some examples: Question 8 in the section is: In cross-cultural communication, I usually consciously use body language such as gestures or other non-verbal means. Question 9: In cross-cultural communication, I will avoid offensive language and behavior. And Question 10: In cross-cultural communication, I will recognize each other's cultural differences and objectively evaluate the behavior of the foreigners.

The average score for the ICC is 54.5 with the highest score 75 and the lowest 37. 52% of the respondents score above the average level. 40% are between 50 to 60, 30% between 40 to 50, 23% between 60 to 70, 4% below 40, and 3% above 70.

The full score of all the items in the questionnaire totals 152. The result of the survey shows that the highest score is 150, the lowest 91, and the average score 114.86. The analysis results show that 53% of the students' ICC scores are above the average; 11% below 100, 52% are between 100 to 120; 36% between 120 to 140; and there is only 1% above 140. The average level of students' ICC is relatively high.

3.3 Correlations between ICC and Influencing Factors

This part of research is intended to see if there exist any correlations between the ICC of the EFL college students and their academic achievements indicated by their CET-6, CET-4, and final exams. The data analysis shows that students who passed CET-4 have the highest points in ICC, students who passed CET-6 come second, and students who have not attended either CET-4 or CET-6 come third. Comparing variance and standard deviation of the three test categories, we can see the ICC grades of the students who have passed CET-6 are most stable, the ICC grades of students who have passed CET-4 are less stable than that of students who have past CET-6, and the ICC grades of students who have not attended either CET-4 or CET-6 show the greatest volatility. The ranges of the three categories have the same properties. Thus, we come to the conclusion that

students' ICC has a certain degree of correlation with their academic achievements. The higher the academic level is, the higher the ICC is.

Intercultural communication entails communication with foreigners. International experience is supposed to correlate with ICC. The correlational analysis confirms this assumption. The average ICC of the students with international experience is 117.3, 5.7 points higher than those without international experience. The variance of the former is 26.8 points lower than the latter, which means ICC score of students with international experience is much more stable than those without international experience.

Chen Lin (2014) points out that female students are more capable in language learning than male students. This study is to examine whether female students behave better in ICC. Statistics confirm the assumption that the average ICC of female students is higher than that of male students. Also, the variance, the standard deviation and the range of the female students' ICC grade tend to be more stable than those of the male students.

4. Conclusion

By means of questionnaire survey, this study has obtained relevant data regarding the current situation of the ICC of the EFL students in North China Electric Power University. With the analysis and discussion of the collected data, we come to the conclusion that the EFL students' IC knowledge, IC awareness and ICC are all relatively high, and that there do exist positive correlations between the students' ICC and their academic achievements, and such factors as international experience, gender and the majors.

According to the data analysis, all the students are above the pass level of ICC, and nearly half of them reach the level of a good general standard. A few of them can even reach the level of excellence. Thus, we can conclude that the EFL students' ICC in NCEPU is relatively high. The reason behind this phenomenon might be that the students in NCEPU, a "211 project" key university, all have a high level of English proficiency, and that since the university is located in Beijing, the capital city, the students have easy and convenient access to intercultural environment, which contributes to the high level of ICC.

Through different correlational studies of the students' ICC and their academic achievement, and other relevant influencing factors, we find that the students' ICC correlates positively with their academic performance. The higher their academic level is, the higher their ICC score is. The ICC of the students also correlates positively with international experience, female students, and English majors. Students without international experience, male students and non-English majors all have relatively low ICC.

On doubt this study has some limitations. First, it is based on one single case of EFL students in NCEPU. It might not represent the overall situation of the EFL students' ICC in China. Second, this research only focuses the current situation of students' ICC. It does not examine the intercultural instruction of the EFL teachers and the intercultural environment of the university. Third, the questions designed in the questionnaire are all platitudes that might not cover the happenings in daily intercultural communication.

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