

# Reflecting on College Intercultural Instruction

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**Abstract**—This paper provides an academic analysis on college intercultural instruction. The analysis reveals that problems still exist in aspects of teaching materials, teaching stuff, and ICC assessment. And based on the problems, suggestions are offered to try to give some implications in future intercultural instruction.

**Keywords**—*intercultural communication; intercultural communication competence (ICC); ICC assessment*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since Intercultural Communication study was first introduced to China during the early 1980s, it has aroused great attention in domestic linguistic study. Scholars both in linguistics and education have conducted numerous researches on it. Their studies grew from academic interest to theoretical research and practical implementation. Great achievements have been made and intercultural communication has won its own status in college English teaching. The Requirement for College English Teaching in China issued by the Ministry of Education of China has listed cultivating college students' intercultural communication competence (ICC) as a goal in the syllabus, it says that it is important to focus not only on developing learners' linguistic skills, but also on advancing their intercultural communication competence, and their ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in English with people of different cultural backgrounds. Under such circumstance, a lot of colleges have set up the curriculum as follow up course to cultivate students' ICC.

Even though efforts have been made in cultivating students' ICC, the result is not satisfied. Problems still exist in college intercultural instruction. This article would try to analyze reasons hinder the effect of intercultural teaching and development of students' ICC, and provides some insights into college intercultural teaching.

## II. PROBLEMS IN COLLEGE STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL INSTRUCTION

Many scholars give definitions to intercultural communication competence. Among them, Byram's is widely accepted. In his model, he believes that four intercultural dimensions should be considered. They are:

- Knowledge of social groups, their products & practices;

- Skills of interpreting and relating a document explain to and relate it to documents from one's own culture;
- Skills of discovery and interaction ability to acquire new knowledge and operate their real-time communication & interaction;
- Attitudes: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief, critical cultural awareness and ability to evaluate critically.

When it comes to a perfect course, a lot of factors should be concerned: teacher, textbook, syllabus, students and teaching model. According to Byam, intercultural communication competence is composed by knowledge, language competence, skill, discourse competence, attitude and cultural critical consciousness. Compare with his definition, problems exist in presenting college intercultural communication teaching, there's still a long way to go.

### A. Teaching Materials

Teaching materials influence the implementation of teaching objectives and achievement of teaching goal directly. Based on Byram's intercultural communicative competence assessment model, ICC dimensions include awareness, attitude, knowledge and skills. The knowledge dimension involves culture of their own and cultures of others, including: social political, religion, history and geography, social manners, behavior norms, customs and values and so on. While most of teaching materials available emphasize only on social manners, behavior norms, customs and values, they use considerably words to describe and explain what are they and how students should understand them. Hardly do these teaching materials involve philosophy, history and religion, which are factors intercultural instructors couldn't ignore in the process of intercultural communication cultivation.

Taking philosophy as an example, when comparing Chinese collectivism with western individualism, students may not understand why there's such difference. Teachers can explain that philosophy is the base of all thoughts. Chinese collectivism comes from ancient Chinese philosophy, mainly from Confucianism, which is a school of thought represented by Confucius and Mencius. It has its own code of behavior; one of it is that it emphasizes the importance of family and social order. Thus whatever they do, Chinese people would first consider the profit of a certain group not themselves. While in western countries, people

would like to take themselves as the priority, because western philosophy believes universe is the existence of space. Everything in the space is separable, isolated and relative opposite. Human being exist as an isolated unit who is self-supporting and self-sustaining, thus individualism is advocated in their culture.

Cases analysis in teaching materials is used to show circumstances when cultural clashes happened for students to better understand cultural differences between different cultures. While the cases available mainly focus on how those foreigners confused with Chinese culture, cultural clashes happen when they don't know something about Chinese culture. Only a small part of them involves how Chinese people couldn't adapt themselves in a different culture. Intercultural communication should be a bidirectional action; both cultures should be considered in textbooks. It is necessary to not only pay attention to western culture's input but also Chinese culture's output. Knowledge should be two-way transferred, and when compilers choose cases used in the teaching materials, both sides should be taken into consideration.

The main aim of intercultural college teaching is to cultivate students' ability on explaining relevant two or more cultures to enhance their critical thinking and enable them to evaluate their own culture and foreign culture objectively and finally apply the ability to intercultural communicating. Cultural inhibit in intercultural communication is not from incomprehension of the target culture but from unfamiliar with the difference between native and target culture. (Yang Xueyun 2010: 128). Intercultural communication knowledge should involve both Chinese culture and foreign cultures. The course should be a systematic one, including both Chinese culture cultivating and intercultural communication cultivating. As a Chinese student, he should first know Chinese culture well then foreign cultures and on base of this knowledge could he further develop ICC. But most of the universities set up intercultural communication course as their follow up course only put intercultural communication cultivating as their teaching goal and neglect Chinese culture cultivating. Lacking Chinese culture as a comparison, students couldn't fully understand foreign cultures and this would slow down the development of their intercultural communication competence.

### *B. Teaching Stuff*

Intercultural instruction is not a course purely teaching knowledge of foreign cultures, and developing students' proper behavior in intercultural communicating is not its single goal. The course should be a process to cultivate students' integrated competence in acquiring comprehension of different cultures individually and inversely by emphasizing their unique history, literature, art, custom, value, social group and thorough understanding and sympathy of their members, including analysis on major issues and cultural simulation and so on. (Moran 2001)

In teaching process, the teacher is the subject and instructor. Teacher's intercultural communication competence is a necessary prelude and basic procedure in

intercultural instruction. Teacher's ICC and his intercultural instruction ability affect the carrying out of intercultural instruction, the implement of intercultural teaching method, the development of intercultural teaching activity as well as the realize of the aim of intercultural instruction. To some extent, teaching behavior will influence the form and development of students' ICC. "The teacher's intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence will influence on the teaching and learning of students' intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence." (Nieto & Booth 2010: 421)

Present intercultural teaching stuff is not so satisfied. According to Han Xiaohui's study, she found that there's no common understanding about intercultural communication competence among intercultural teachers, most of them only have a vague concept and they believe the essential element of ICC is knowledge, especially knowledge of language itself and knowledge of culture. Yan Jinlan found that many teachers are still lacking in the capability of ICC themselves, such as the weak awareness of ICC. In her research, 95% teachers investigated believe language skill is important for an English teacher. But they simply equal language knowledge with intercultural communication competence. And that misunderstanding would be a barrier in their ICC development. Besides, intercultural teachers are lack of intercultural communication training. 82% teachers investigated have not been trained on intercultural communication teaching and most of them rely on self-teaching to improve their own ICC. Due to the limitation of politics, economy and geographical environment, many teacher don't have intercultural insight. They haven't been abroad to experience different culture personally. All their understanding about foreign culture comes from books (Yan Jinglan 2014). This is also confirmed by Wu Shuli and Zhou Yingli. In their study, they found the teachers lack of intercultural experience themselves. There's no wonder they would put knowledge teaching as their first priority on intercultural teaching and neglect the cultivating of students' inner ability.

### *C. Assessment System*

Assessment system is an important part of intercultural teaching. The development of a conceptual framework for assessing Chinese college students' ICC is not only conducive to objectively assessing their ICC, but also provides guidance on improving it (Gao Yongchen, 2014). According to Kong Deliang, Luan Su's study, they find that intercultural teaching assessment can improve both teacher and students' consciousness on ICC, and it is an indispensable procedure on evaluating teaching process and teaching effects. Numerous achievements have been made on the efforts of scholars and college English teachers and thanks for their industrious work, it is possible for people now to have better theories on how to develop students ICC, better ways on how to cultivate students' intercultural communication knowledge and efficient teaching methods on course teaching. Well-scales of ICC are still not available so far. A consensus has been reached at home and abroad that ICC is measurable. But current intercultural teaching

assessment exerts emphasis on students' language skills and culture knowledge, evaluations on culture values and culture behavior model can not be found. This means intercultural assessment is not complete. And the result of the assessment is not reliable. There is no ICC conceptual framework and no ICC scale for student assessment. It is unclear that on what level it can be said that their intercultural communication competence is just OK. And to what extent can it be told to students that their ICC has been improved.

Assessment system includes teaching assessment and students self-evaluating. The construction of ICC assessment system is a complex systematic work involves many factors. It should objectively and scientifically conform to current situation of college students ICC, as well as reflecting the relevance and systematicness of theory and practice on college students ICC. Meanwhile the ICC assessment should be conducted quantitatively and qualitatively from different angles and use multiple methods, such as: case study, in-depth interviews, diary analysis, self-evaluation, other evaluation, triangulation and so on. And the assessor, evaluation object, assessing goal, specific situation, even social condition and historic factors, factors like these ones should also be taken into consideration.

### III. SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

#### A. *Raising Teaching Staff's Qualification*

Intercultural instructors play different roles in different teaching aspects. In terms of cognition, the teacher is the instructor and coach; in the aspect of the content of cognition, the teacher is source of information and applier of it, as well as judge and edifier; when it comes to the aspect of the cause of cognition, the teacher becomes a guider and co-researcher; As to aspect of self-cognition, the teacher is a learner, a witness and co-learner. Teachers are the crucial elements in achieving the final goal of cultivating students' ICC. Thus they should first improve their own ICC and the capability in intercultural instruction.

Besides self-improving, one change intercultural teachers should make in intercultural instruction is teaching method. Intercultural teachers should not only use explicit approach but also need to add implicit teaching approach in their intercultural teaching. Explicit teaching approach refers to those teaching activities which seems to be direct, explicit, externally implemented and can even be independent of language teaching such as the instruction of history, social system, customs, etiquette, taboo of target culture. Explicit knowledge teaching is necessary but not enough. Researches show that if intercultural communication learners only have explicit knowledge of foreign cultures, when they face intercultural communicating, those generalized, stereotyped cultures could not grantee a successful intercultural communicating. The challenge students faced in intercultural learning is the ability they should possess when coping with dynamic matters in intercultural communicating and it contains not only recognition and memorizing of that knowledge. Thus, intercultural teachers should put their eyes on other characters of culture. That is, culture is also current, tacit, objective and personal. When the teachers recognize

these, they will devote themselves on training students' critical thinking ability, training students' ability of analyzing communicating situation, developing their ability to see the true nature of things through appearance and teach them how to think and analyze independently. In such circumstance, intercultural teaching needs implicit approach to cultivate students' ICC. Implicit approach teaching is a process accompany with language learning, they are closely related and penetrate each other. It is not just a process through which teacher analyze the teaching point to help students understand the discourse or help students acknowledge cultural background of a certain language phenomena to enrich their culture knowledge. It's a process students get their own understanding and acquirement of the main point and its practical significance after thinking out for themselves when learning a language material. Intercultural teacher should guide students to feel the reality objectively, to create authentic situation let students experience intercultural situation personally, and develop their ability to explain and judge a certain culture phenomena. In a word, let the students to construct their own ICC.

In intercultural instruction, no matter it is explicit teaching or implicit teaching, language instructors should, besides simple explanation, use multiple teaching methods to realize their teaching goal, include problem solving, questionnaire investigation, case analysis, question discussion and so on. Modern information technology can be used to construct intercultural context, build multi-dimensional teaching resource, enrich teaching method and promote students' automatic learning.

In all, intercultural instructors should promote their own ICC and teaching ability to serve intercultural instruction. The development and instruction of intercultural teaching stuff should meet the need of ICC cultivating.

#### B. *Enriching Teaching Materials*

Teaching materials are the main tools in teaching activity. To students, from which they can acquire knowledge systematically and it can help them to learn what the teacher taught easily. Based on it, students can preview, review and do homework and efficiently learn what they want to know. To teachers, teaching materials are the foundation they use to employ their teaching activity and offer teaching content for teachers to prepare for the class, give the lecture and evaluate students' academic performance.

The content of intercultural teaching materials should meet the need of ICC cultivation, although lots of universities have set up intercultural communication course as their compulsory course or optional course. Because there's no unified syllabus, what should be added into the teaching content is mainly decided by intercultural instructor. Therefore a unified teaching material should be used in the course, and the specific teaching content should combine the university's own characteristic. For example, institutions of foreign trade and economies may lay special emphasis on cross-cultural management; College of Communication & Journalism should focus on cross-cultural media, and normal

college may pay more attention on comparison of English teaching and way of communication.

ICC presentation in teaching materials shall give priority to skills of relation and discovery among cultures, attitudes and critical cultural awareness. Current intercultural communicating textbook mainly focus on the surface level of cultural differences between countries and their influence on communicating. It is not enough. It should promote students' ICC through deep understanding of the cultures. Teaching materials need cover all aspects of social culture. It can choose cases from different social context such as the learners' native culture or their traveling experience to introduce target culture from different angles. English as a common language plays a role as the tool to realize communication between people from different cultures. The teaching materials should offer cases used in different culture context to develop students' skills of discovery. For example: communicate with Swaziland, Canadian or Brazil. Then the language learners could better understanding how English is used to communicate as a common language and develop intercultural communicate attitude and sensitivity accordingly. Teaching materials should integrate skills of discovery into teaching objective or problem design; give opportunity for both language teachers and students to develop their culture insights. And from this aspect, teaching content and task design should closely related with living experience and give students chances to develop their skills of discovery.

Whatever topics can be used as teaching content and shown in English. Topics about differences between different ethnic groups, different genders, different ages, different sexual group and their influence on communication from different cultures should be added into teaching materials. With these learning materials and compared with other people's cultural position, learners can understand different cultural phenomena, and exam closely their own and develop an intercultural insight.

In China, IC textbook curriculum develop is just in its initial stage. In future, IC instruction should pay more attention on problems related in social reality, and gradually expand ICC in intercultural instruction into the region of international education, international trade, diplomatic and so on, make the curriculum an applied course with strong vitality and potential.

### *C. Completing ICC Assessment System*

There's no a valid standardized measuring process for ICC learning yet. To complete students' ICC evaluation system, both contents and methods of ICC assessment should be developed. Basic elements of students' ICC should be put into consideration. They are structure of students' English knowledge, their language proficiency, discourse competence, attitude, cultural critical consciousness, and English skills of listening, speaking, interpreting, reading and writing.

Traditionally, culture assessment has measured the scattered factual knowledge of culture, rather than insights or awareness of the essence of a culture. Cause they are too

abstract to be implemented in ICC assessment. However, difficulty doesn't mean impossibility. Formative assessment can be a good way to assess students' awareness and sensitivity of a culture.

Summative assessment offered by some examination center or assessment organization is not validity and couldn't fully reflect the development of students' ICC. Summative assessment usually showed in forms of written test with multiple-choices, true or false questions and short answer questions to provide objective revelation of a student's competence in intercultural communication. But written test always involves the factor of luck. ICC evaluation shall integrate formative and summative assessment of intercultural activities to measure development of students' ICC. Formative assessment can be realized through performance evaluation and portfolio assessment. Performance evaluation is a supplement to written test of cultural behavior. Through performance assessment, specific tasks are assigned to students and by observing their response; teachers can evaluate students' performance to see how they acquired a certain target culture phenomena. Since the method is task-based, the task must be carefully designed to cover the content of assessment. For example, if teaching materials offer materials of family and society in three different countries. In the teaching process, the teachers analyze, discuss and compare the according material with students, and then matched assessment should exist in the teaching material in forms of exercises or exam to evaluate students' ICC. Another method is portfolio assessment. A portfolio reflects students' progress at each stage both in learning and in thinking, so it can clearly reveal the development of students' ICC. Portfolios can provide an organizing structure for teacher-student feedbacks and encourage students to reflect on their work, to analyze their progress, and to set goals to self-reflection. Portfolio assessment is a typical formative assessment method and consistent with student-centered teaching principle. If scientifically designed and carried out in the assessment of ICC, it can constructively serve teaching of ICC on college English.

To summarize, efficient assessment can provide convinced proof for teachers to cultivate students' ICC. The teacher should construct different dimensional assessment model according to students' character in different universities, constantly complete ICC assessment system to help students raise their ICC.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Chinese English teaching make English a social common language as one of its goals. Language learning and culture study is not only for a better communication and cooperation with people from different cultures, not only for participate in issues of world concern such as world peace safeguard and global environmental governance, but also for a better understanding and appreciating culture values of different countries and better delivery of Chinese culture to the whole world. Against the background of globalization, Chinese intercultural scholars should launch researches on localization of intercultural communication theories. As



carrier and tool of intercultural instruction, intercultural teaching materials should proceed from Chinese reality, and focus on the enhancement of students' ability in international communication.

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