Research on the Cultivation Mode of Intercultural Communication Competence for Chinese College Students in Local Application-oriented Universities Against the Background of the Construction of "The Silk Road Economic Belt"

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ABSTRACT
Against the background of the implementation of "The Silk Road Economic Belt", combining the school running orientation, characteristics of majors and employment channels of local application-oriented colleges and universities to cultivate "application-oriented, localized and internationalized talents", this study constructs the evaluation system of intercultural communication competence for Chinese college students in local application-oriented universities, and selects some students in Shaanxi Province for actual evaluation. The results show that college students’ intercultural communication competence needs to be enhanced, on the basis of which some suggestions have been put forward concerning training of teaching faculty, setting of courses, cross-cultural communication activities, cooperation and exchange projects. This study is not only conducive to promoting the evaluation and research of college students’ intercultural communication competence, but also providing reference for the setting of the regional cultural courses in colleges and universities in Shaanxi Province and decision-making of relevant governments at different levels and enterprises. According to the cultures of countries and regions along the Silk Road Economic Belt, this study explores how to effectively communicate in English as the world common language, thus promoting exchanges and cooperation with other areas of the world against the background of the regional Chinese Han culture and Islamic Culture in Central and West Asia. Furthermore, this study provides certain ideas and experience for the future studies.

Keywords: The Silk Road Economic Belt, local application-oriented universities, Chinese college students, intercultural communication competence, cultivation mode

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the Chinese government put forward the strategy of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt, which has now entered the implementation stage. The Silk Road Economic Belt is located in the economic and cultural circle of northwest China, Central Asia and Western Europe. Xi’an in Shaanxi Province, the starting point of the Silk Road, is the heart of the Economic Belt along the Eurasian Land Bridge. Located in the blending zone of northwest Chinese culture, Central and Western Asian culture and Western European culture, Shaanxi is bound to become a new flourishing economic region with close cultural and economic cooperation between Europe and Asia. As the geographic hub of economic exchanges between the East and the West that starts from Xi’an in the east, extends through Central and Western Asia and reaches Rome in the west, "The Silk Road" has been a far-reaching cultural exchange center of the four cultural systems in the history of mankind, namely, the systems...
of Chinese Culture, Indian Culture, the Semitic Islamic Culture and European Greek and Roman Cultures. The communicative medium of these four cultural systems was largely trade along the Silk Road. With the rise of the "the Belt and Road", the trade between China and the belt has become more prosperous. Meanwhile, the cultural exchanges between China and the belt have become increasingly frequent. The purpose of this study is to figure out how intercultural communication can play its role as a link in this region and promote cultural, technological and economic exchanges among different ethnic groups.

II. REVIEW OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Since Hymes [1] put forward the concept of communicative competence, scholars at home and abroad have carried out a lot of research on intercultural communicative competence. Spitzberg and Cupach[2] put forward the theory of the three elements of intercultural communicative competence, which refer to motivation, knowledge and skills respectively. Motivation is the desire to communicate with others; Knowledge refers to the awareness and understanding of communication, including various cultural variables at the national level and individual identity. Skills refer to abilities that should be mastered in communicative behavior, such as attentiveness, tolerance of fuzziness, self-calminess, empathy, self-regulation, and the ability to accurately predict and explain the behavior of the other party in communication. Byram[3] constructed a model of intercultural communication competence, which is composed of knowledge, skills, attitude, disposition and behavior orientation. Only by combining language ability, social language ability and discourse ability with these components can intercultural communication competence be interactively formed. Kim[4] used the research methods of social psychology, applied linguistics and sociology to summarize the various factors that affect intercultural communication competence into a new model composed of cognitive factors, emotional factors and behavioral factors. The three levels interactively form a person’s overall intercultural communication competence in real life. The cognitive factors mainly include the openness of the mind, the understanding of complexity and diversity of things and the flexibility of vision and perspectives. Emotional factors include empathy, tolerance for uncertainty and the ability to overcome prejudice and ethnocentrism. Behavioral factors include the ability to deal with communicative problems, the ability to build and maintain relationships, and the ability to accomplish communicative tasks. Lustig and Koester [5] argued that intercultural communication competence consists of three aspects: context, appropriability and effectiveness, and knowledge, motivation and behavior.

In China, Wen Qufang[6] argued that cross-cultural communicative competence includes two parts, communicative competence and cross-cultural competence. Communicative competence includes linguistic competence, pragmatic competence and strategic competence, and cross-cultural competence includes sensitivity to cultural differences, the tolerance for cultural differences and the flexibility of dealing with cultural differences in three levels. Yang Ying and Zhuang Enping [7] believe that intercultural communication competence consists of systems of global mentality, cultural adaptation, knowledge and communication management. Zhong Hua, Bai Qianhui and Fan Weiwei[8] constructed the self-report scale of intercultural communicative competence for Chinese college students, believing that intercultural communicative competence consists of communicative competence and intercultural competence, with the former divided into linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence, and the latter into skills, knowledge, attitudes and awareness. Gao Yongchen[9] constructed the conceptual framework for assessing Chinese college students’ intercultural communication competence based on the domestic and foreign research on intercultural communication competence, which consists of two mutually interactive dimensions of knowing and doing.

Research on intercultural communication is flourishing in Shaanxi Province. Many institutions of cross-cultural research have been set up in colleges and universities, and scholars have made multi-perspective interpretation of cross-cultural research. Qiu Kemin[10] analyzed the importance of cross-cultural management to enterprise development in human resource activities such as recruitment, training and performance management. Liu Hui[11] analyzed the characteristics of European and American tourists’ travel behavior in Xi’an from a cross-cultural perspective, and proposed corresponding countermeasures. Some scholars have also discussed the intercultural communication competence from the aspects of culture, literature, religion and intercultural sensitivity. Scholars in Shaanxi mainly focus on the influence of cross-culture on corporate human resource management, how cross-culture promotes the development of tourism in Shaanxi and the cultivation of college students’ cross-cultural communication competence. Few scholars have been involved in the cultivation of cross-cultural communication competence under the regional cultural background of “the Silk Road Economic Belt”.

On the basis of comprehensive study, comparison and investigation, especially Gao Yongchen’s [12] system of assessing Chinese college students’ intercultural communication competence as conceptual framework, and his Intercultural Communication Competence Inventory for Chinese College
Students (shortened as ICCICCCS), our research group paid visit to relevant enterprises and institutions to carry out the investigation at the early stage in order to have an in-depth understanding of the requirements of knowledge, ability and quality in the industry for cross-cultural communication with countries and regions along the Silk Road, thus laying a practical foundation for the formulation of our research plans. On the basis of literature reading and investigation, the intercultural communication competence test scale between the culture of northwest China and the culture of Central and Western China is developed after going through reliability and validity test, and the intercultural communication competence of the college students along the Silk Road Economic Belt is specifically measured and evaluated. Then, combined with the objective of this study and the personnel training specifications of local application-oriented colleges and universities, this study explores the cultivation model of intercultural communication competence of college students in Shaanxi local colleges and universities against the background of "The Silk Road Economic Belt".

III. SURVEY ON THE STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN LOCAL APPLICATION-ORIENTED UNIVERSITIES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY OF "THE BELT AND ROAD"

In this study, the revised scale was used as a measurement tool to conduct a survey on intercultural communication competence of 236 sophomores from five local application-oriented universities in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province. A total of 260 questionnaires were issued, and 245 were recovered. After sorting out, 230 effective questionnaires were obtained, with an effective recovery rate of 88.5%.

A. Results of knowledge system measurement

According to the study of Shen Juming and Gao Yongchen, the knowledge system of intercultural communication competence includes modules of knowledge, consciousness and critical thinking. In view of the research needs, this study revises some test questions, and measures knowledge, consciousness and critical thinking of the respondents in the intercultural communication along the Silk Road.

1) Results of the knowledge module: The test results show that the average score of knowledge module of intercultural communication competence of students in local application-oriented universities is 2.95, and the overall performance is average. Through detailed analysis of the answers to the questions, it is found that college students have some knowledge about the geographical conditions, lifestyle, communication norms and customs of the countries and regions along the Silk Road, but their knowledge of historical events, literature and political systems is limited, let alone its values and the essence of national character.

2) Results of the awareness module: According to the scale, the average score of this module is 3.96, reflecting college students’ strong awareness of intercultural communication, which is also the inevitable result of the combined effect of multiple factors. Along with China’s economic, social and cultural development and the rise of China in international stage, cross-cultural communication activities are thriving in a wide range. In such a situation, "College English Curriculum Requirements" clearly put forward the intercultural communication as a major teaching content. Therefore, more and more emphasis is put on the cultivation of students’ intercultural communication competence and students also have generally raised positive awareness of cross-cultural communication. The results of this study also confirm the positive influence of college English teaching on cultivating students’ intercultural communication competence. Test results indicate that Chinese college students have sufficient knowledge and understanding of excellent traditional Chinese culture and modern and socialist culture. Furthermore, they can evaluate the cultural differences between China and the countries and regions along the Silk Road in cross-cultural communication in an objective, impartial, open-minded manner rather than a subjective, biased and narrow-minded way. As a result, they will not be likely to have a sense of superiority or self-denial of our own culture. This positive awareness of intercultural communication helps students to "absorb the essence and discard the dregs" in intercultural communication, and also helps to realize the mutual sharing of civilizations and mutual learning of cultures in the communication with other countries and regions along the Silk Road.

3) Results of the critical thinking module: The average score of the critical thinking module is 3.02, which reflects that the cultivation of students’ critical thinking in local application-oriented universities needs to be strengthened. The test results show that in cross-cultural communication activities with countries and regions along the Silk Road, college students can only carry out logical communication and reasoning activities to a limited extent for different phenomena and opinions. This also suggests that the teaching tasks should be set according to the teaching objectives and students’ critical thinking awareness and ability should be cultivated.
B. Results of action system measurement

The intercultural communication system of college students not only includes the knowledge system, but also cannot be without the action system. Just like the relationship between theory and practice, the knowledge system and the action system are not isolated. Instead, they are interdependent and they promote each other. Knowledge is the premise, which lays the foundation for cross-cultural communication. Action is the application of knowledge in practice, which in turn promotes the revision, enrichment and development of knowledge. The action system in this study consists of three modules: attitude, communicative skills and communicative strategies.

1) Results of the attitude module: According to the results of the module, the average score for the attitude scale is 3.89, which is an indication of the positive behavioral tendency of college students in local application-oriented universities in cross-cultural communication. They are able to appreciate the cultures of the countries and regions along the Silk Road with an open mind. Similarly, they can handle inconsistent and even contradictory values against their own cultural tradition with tolerant attitude, and they can be actively engaged in successful communication according to the communicative situation, social occasions, in view of the identity, gender and age, and the relationship between the foreigners and themselves through flexibly using language, postures, sign language and etc.

2) Results of the skills module: The skills module has an average score of 3.64, indicating that in cross-cultural communication college students in local application-oriented universities can basically use proper pronunciation, intonation and clear oral expressions to present topics and voice ideas, master the skills of transferring roles in conversations, complement their communication through the appropriate body language and space-time language, and adapt to different communication style and communication scenarios in cross-cultural communication.

3) Results of the strategies module: The average score for the strategy module is 3.78, which reflects that college students can use appropriate code-switching strategies and select appropriate communication strategies according to different cultural contexts and situational contexts in intercultural communication with foreigners along the Silk Road. Additionally, they can be in accordance with the principle of respect for differences in the communication to ensure the smooth communication; and basically they can overcome cultural prejudice, thinking stereotypes to seek common ground while reserving differences.

IV. SUGGESTIONS ON OPTIMIZING THE CULTIVATION MODE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE OF COLLEGE STUDENTS IN LOCAL APPLICATION-ORIENTED UNIVERSITIES

In the context of the implementation of the strategy of "The Silk Road Economic Belt", this study combined with the orientation of running schools and the goal of talent training in local application-oriented universities in Shaanxi province, revised the scale for assessing college students’ intercultural communication competence in the communicative activities with foreigners from countries and regions along the Silk Road, and selected some students for measurement. Based on what is discussed above, the following suggestions on the cultivation of intercultural communication competence were formed:

A. Strengthening teachers’ training through cooperation between government and universities

At present, the professional backgrounds of English teachers in local application-oriented universities are mostly foreign linguistics, British and American literature, translation studies, English education, etc. So, it is inevitable that they have limited understanding of courses related to regional and country studies and insufficient accumulation of relevant knowledge, which has also become a constraint for the cultivation of college students’ intercultural communication competence. Therefore, the government should earnestly provide support in capital, technology, resources, and establish cooperation platform between universities and social organizations, enterprises and institutions. Thanks to the platform, teachers can be encouraged to enter enterprises to have practical training, especially those with the trading relations in economy, culture, education with companies along the Silk Road. In this way, teachers can develop real first-hand experience and knowledge of the enterprises’ requirements for college students in knowledge, ability and quality. Moreover, typical cases are introduced into classroom teaching and teachers are in a better position to combine classroom teaching and real working practice out of school by systematic and practical task design, which facilitates students transferring of the learned knowledge and skills to real tasks.

B. Strengthening the establishment of courses related to the countries and regions along the Silk Road

For a long time, much importance has been attached to the introduction of European and American cultures in college English teaching in China. However, the construction of "The Silk Road Economic Belt" urgently called for local colleges integrating existing teaching resources, recruiting and employing experts and scholars who are familiar with and have a profound
knowledge and experience in the language and culture of the countries and regions along the Silk Road. Those universities with resources can also invite and employ foreign experts and scholars to deliver lectures and courses, such as "Culture in Russia, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Northeast Asia", "Western Asia", "Studies on The European Union and its Member States", "Research Methods in Regions and Nations Along the Silk Road", "Politics and International Relations", "International Organizations and International Law", "Contemporary Diplomatic History of China" and other courses that enable students to acquire basic and important regional and national knowledge through course learning. Universities can also implement content-based teaching, in which teachers adopt case teaching in the process of knowledge acquisition. Through the typical cases of intercultural communication, teachers guide students to explore successful and unsuccessful cross-cultural communicative activities to understand such surface culture as foreign geographical environment, local conditions and customs, traditions and habits, and through critical thinking activities, they appreciate such deep culture as religious beliefs, ways of thinking, values, which paves a way for the success of cross-cultural communication against the background of constructing "The Silk Road Economic Belt".

C. Organizing colorful intercultural communication activities

Through strengthening the cooperation with relevant government agencies, enterprises and institutions, non-governmental organizations and social organizations, local application-oriented universities can expand the scope of classroom teaching and create opportunities for students to experience the customs and culture of countries along the Silk Road. In Shaanxi Province, for example, relying on the strategic position of Xi’an in constructing the "Silk Road Economic Belt", universities can organize students to attend various fairs and serve as volunteers, who provide services such as tourism guide, interpretation and translation using relevant knowledge of language and culture by means of body language and other nonverbal communication. In this process, they learn to choose the appropriate code-switching strategies, discourse communication strategies to convey the Chinese culture, understand cultures along the Silk Road. Besides, universities can also hold cross-cultural exchange festivals for Chinese and foreign students, set up various associations and organizations for cultural exchange, and hold cultural appreciation and exchange activities on a regular basis so that students can experience the charm of foreign cultures on campus. The cross-cultural communication activities based on real scenes can help students experience the differences between Chinese and foreign cultures along the Silk Road with an open mind to appreciate cultural diversity and gradually adapt to the communication of different cultures in that they flexibly choose communication strategies according to specific communicative objects, topics, scenes to achieve cultural communication and mutual learning.

D. Establishing regional cooperation and exchange programs

With the steady progress of the construction of "the Silk Road Economic Belt", more and more interactions and exchanges have been carried out between different universities, cities, and regions. With a careful consideration of the orientation of their disciplines, characteristics of their majors, the talent training goal, universities actively seek the cooperation with universities, social groups and organizations along the Silk Road through the programs of sending exchange students to other universities, paid internships and joint training students, which provide students with first-hand physical experiences of foreign cultures and enable them to take the initiative to learn to adapt to the cultural differences, build cultural empathy, develop cultural identity, tolerate and accept different foreign cultures through critical thinking. Naturally, they are able to form the mentality of respecting cultural differences and positive cognitive tendencies in constant cultural exchange, thus achieving mutual learning between their own culture and foreign cultures.

V. CONCLUSION

Against the background of the implementation of "The Silk Road Economic Belt", combining the school running orientation, characteristics of majors and employment channels of local application-oriented colleges and universities to cultivate "application-oriented, localized and internationalized talents", this study constructs the evaluation system of intercultural communication competence for Chinese college students, and selects some students in Shaanxi Province for actual evaluation. The results show that college students’ intercultural communication competence needs to be enhanced, on the basis of which some suggestions have been put forward concerning training of teaching faculty, setting of courses, cross-cultural communication activities, cooperation and exchange projects. This study is not only conducive to promoting the evaluation and research of college students’ intercultural communication competence, but also providing reference for the setting of the regional cultural courses in colleges and universities in Shaanxi Province and decision-making of relevant governments at different levels and enterprises. According to the cultures of countries and regions along the Silk Road Economic Belt, this study explores how to effectively communicate in English as the world common language, thus promoting exchanges and cooperation with other areas of the world against the background of the
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