



An Instructional Design of Inquiry-Based Learning for the Course of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract. Inquiry-based learning plays an important role in the reform of higher education, and its application has been widely investigated in order to improve the teaching effect. As a practical course greatly relying on the method of case study, intercultural communication requires better teaching design to cultivate students' ability to analyze and solve problems. Therefore, this paper proposed a new instructional design for the course of intercultural business communication to guide the student complete the case study through inquiry-based learning.

Keywords: Inquiry-based learning · Intercultural communication · Instructional design

1 Introduction

Although the definition of inquiry-based learning (IBL) may vary slightly, there are agreed core features of it, which is the active learning process of students driven by questions or problems [1]. When applied in different academic domains, the research focus of inquiry-based learning lies in how to scientifically design the learning process to suit the characteristics of various disciplines. It challenges the instructors to design proper learning scheme for the students and participate in the learning process as co-learners. Inquiry-based learning was firstly applied in scientific research, and then stretched to other fields such as the pedagogy of social sciences. As Wei and Rowell [2] have described, social science is another type of science, the problems of which are more complicated to probe with inquiry-based learning since the factors involved in social issues are more complex and reliant on the values and judgments of individuals. Therefore, the application of inquiry-based learning in the courses of humanities and social sciences requires elaborate instructional design. In order to evaluate the effect of application of inquiry-based learning in humanities and social sciences, this paper attempts to provide an IBL instructional design for the students learning cross-cultural communication.

2 Current Research on Inquiry-Based Learning

There have been a multitude of studies on inquiry-based learning worldwide, including the basic research on the definition and phases of inquiry learning, the reflections on the instruction of inquiry-based learning, the application of IBL at different levels of primary, secondary, tertiary and adult education, the relationship between the application of inquiry-based teaching and students' academic level, the link between research and teaching strengthened by inquiry-based learning, how to combine inquiry-based learning with modern science and technology to help rural teaching, the application of IBL among people with learning disabilities, and the role of inquiry-based learning in foreign language acquirement [3]. The research on inquiry-based learning in China started not as early. The education reform has welcomed plenty of studies pertaining IBL that are focused on its application in secondary and higher education. The research on inquiry-based learning in China covers the application of inquiry-based learning in multiple high school subjects including biology, English and Chinese, as well as in civil engineering, advanced mathematics, vocational English and other disciplines in higher education. Among the research focused on English teaching in higher education, there are limited studies investigating the application of inquiry-based learning in the courses of English major and few in cross-cultural business communication. Therefore, this paper aims to apply inquiry-based learning in the intercultural business communication course of undergraduate English major students with a case study designed for the students to acquire the knowledge of cultural dimensions.

3 Case-Based Learning in Intercultural Communication

As one of the core courses for English majors in China, the course of intercultural communication aims to cultivate the skills for the students to not only communicate in a foreign language fluently but also be able to handle the cultural differences that may hinder the communication. In order to improve the education quality, the teaching method of cross-cultural communication has been widely discussed and there are multiple modes investigated, among which the case-based learning is the most popular teaching method in intercultural communication, since it emphasizes the cultivation of ability [4].

There have been plenty of studies investigating the application of case-based learning in intercultural communication. Hu and Chen [4] have analyzed the performance of students in CET 4 after applying case-based learning to college English education when the experimental group has got better scores compared to the control group. Yi and Wu [5] have proposed a new mode of case-based learning that is for the teacher and students to create new cases cooperatively in order to enhance students' understanding of the cultural differences. Other research includes the application of case-based learning in intercultural communication with audio-visual materials [6], the case study of cultural fusion in multinationals [7], and the construction of intercultural digital case database [8].

Case-based teaching encourages the self-learning by the students in the process of reflecting or solving the problems in a given situation, which echoes with the core feature of inquiry-based learning. Furthermore, that case-based learning is suitable for the

application of IBL in humanity domain is like the experiment design for the application of IBL in scientific design. This is the foundation of applying inquiry-based learning in intercultural communication through the instructional design of case study.

4 Applying IBL in Intercultural Communication

4.1 The Analysis on the Learning Situation

The study is conducted to the college students of business English major in the second semester of their freshman year. The students have accommodated to college study and have hands-on experiences in team work and project learning. With proper instruction, they are able to solve problems through self-learning, reasoning and team work. In addition, the students have obtained a comprehensive understanding of culture and the differences in cultural values in previous study to lay the foundation of problem solving.

The teaching content is the intercultural communicative theory of cultural dimensions proposed by Geert Hofstede introduced in the fourth chapter of the textbook *Intercultural Communication in Business* [9]. The traditional teaching method of this part is lecturing because there are a series of new concept to inform the students. Even when examples are included, their main purpose is to facilitate the understanding of certain trait of a particular cultural dimension. In order to revolutionize the teaching method and investigate the effect of applying inquiry-based learning in studying the theory of cultural dimensions, an extensive case in cross-cultural communication is adopted for the students to analyze the cultural differences and propose communicative strategies, from which they can summarize the possible dimensions that can be used to portray the characteristics of various cultures instead of learning and memorizing the concepts passively.

The ability of intercultural communication is stressed as a practical skill in the future career of English major students. Therefore, the course aims at improving students' capacity in effective communication. Learning the communicative theory helps to reveal the cultural differences and provides the students with great support for sensible communication. Given that the ultimate purpose of learning the theory is to promote communicative ability in practice, the students in this lesson are encouraged to solve the problems before they are equipped with the theory of cultural dimensions, in hoping that the students can generate the strategies in intercultural communication that cover or indicate the same points as proposed in cultural dimensions.

4.2 The Choice of the Case

Although case study has been an important part in teaching intercultural communication for a long time as a result of the feature of case-based learning analyzed above. The choice of the cases is not always satisfactory. Some cases are too simple in terms of the description or situation so that the problem is obvious and the conclusion is drawn effortlessly. Not only can this kind of cases contribute little to the effective practice of intercultural communication, but also increase the possibility of overgeneralization or stereotypes [5]. Therefore, the case used in this paper is carefully chosen from the book

of intercultural communication case collection [10]. Different from the short examples in many textbooks with just dozens of words, this case is presented with details including the background information of the characters and the complete developing process of the communication dilemma. The abundant information will facilitate the students to analyze the situation and generate appropriate solutions. The students can practice their skills of critical thinking by digging out the details in the story and use them as arguments for their analysis and conclusion.

The main character in this case has multicultural backgrounds and is faced with a problem about career moving due to a cross-cultural communication failure in a multinational. Compared to other situations such as living in a foreign country, working in a multicultural company is more likely to correspond with the career expectation of the students so that it will be easier for them to accept the simulation and engage in the problem-solving. In addition, different from the contrast of two cultures in the common case studies, this example involves the characters with multicultural background. As a result of globalization, individuals have more opportunities to get exposed to and learn from different cultures compared to their predecessors. Therefore, to analyze and understand this situation can be more practical for the students.

5 Instructional Design

The logic of this case design follows the pattern of practice-theory-practice as shown in “Fig. 1”, which is in accordance with the process of scientific research and the development of a theory.

The students are firstly asked to solve a problem in practice and generalize the features to make up guidance for intercultural communication. The analysis and solution of the students may fall into the categories of different cultural dimensions, so that the teacher can introduce this theory to them. The final step is for the students to improve their solution after a thorough understanding of the different values proposed by cultural dimensions. Therefore, the cycle of abstracting theory from practical experience and guiding the practice with theory is fully achieved. Inquiry-based learning per se can enhance the link between teaching and research [11]. Through the designed process, the

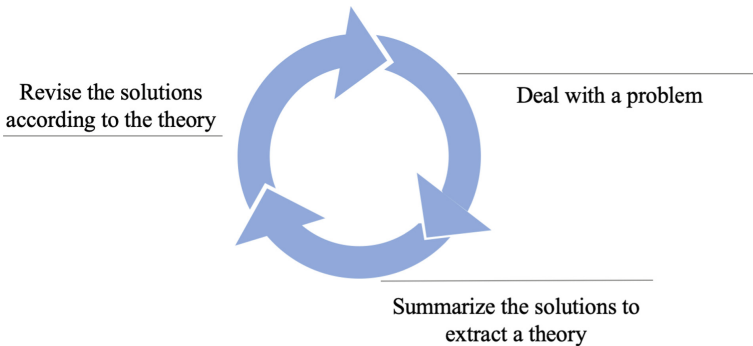


Fig. 1. The process of case-based inquiry learning.

students will not only practice their communicative skills and get a better understanding of cultural dimensions, but also carry out the investigation of a problem to improve their research ability. In the long run, it can help to cultivate the critical thinking and the spirit of scientific research of the undergraduate students.

At the beginning of the class, the students are provided with a detailed case about Bob Chen who was born and grew up in Hong Kong and went to college in Canada. He works for a Toronto-based auditing company and is currently faced with a dilemma of whether to resign because of the divergence of his responsibility from his personal interest and pursuit. Bob has tried to communicate with his senior about his willingness of being transferred to another position where he will be better-motivated. However, the management seems to ignore his demand, which causes him difficulties in keeping working for the company. After learning the situation, the students are divided into groups of four to work on the two major questions assigned to them: what are the factors lead to the problem and how to solve it. Reflecting on the factors causing the problem is a process of training the cultural sensitivity of the students. In successful intercultural communication, the basic is to perceive the cultural differences before one can handle them. The second task of seeking for solution is the ultimate goal for students to adopt effective strategies in solving communicative problems. The students need to master the language skills and cultural influences in proposing the solution.

After the assignment of the task, the teacher will provide the students with supporting materials for their investigation, which are the further readings of Chapter One and Chapter Four in the textbook [9]. The reading material of Chapter One provides the students with the tool of analyzing the situation based on the cultural differences on the national level. The examples in the reading may serve as references for the students to probe the given question. The supporting material of Chapter Four reveals the cultural values in international business by introducing the European Managerial Decision Making Project. The students may get an insight of how communication is realized and how corporate decisions are made in multinational companies.

Equipped with the supporting materials, the students are asked to work on the two problems in thirty minutes including looking for more information on the internet and summarizing the answers of the group discussion. Each group will present their analysis on the situation and coping methods.

On the accomplishment of presenting the research results, the teacher will work with the students to summarize and categorize the analysis and solutions of different groups to form a comprehensive review on the case. Based on the summary, the teacher will introduce the theory of cultural dimensions proposed by Geert Hofstede through the connection between the features of various dimensions and the research results of the students.

In the last part, after the students learn the six cultural dimensions as a generalization of their own research results as well as the aspects they fail to address, they will be asked to revise their analysis about the cultural factors leading to the situation and improve their strategies to solve the problem. Therefore, the students will complete the process of finding out the cultural features and generalizing them through inquiry-based learning, as well as enhance the theoretical knowledge by applying it to the practice.

Table 1. The instructional procedure and expected performance

	Instruction	Student Task	Expected Performance
Step 1	Hand out the case description.	Read the description and get familiar with the situation.	Students can find of the main issues of multicultural factors involved, and the cultural factors resulting in the communicative failure.
Step 2	Offer the supporting materials from the textbook.	Learn the cultural factors mentioned in the materials	Students can relate the elements in the further readings with the issues raised in the case study.
Step 3	Divide the students into groups and ask them to answer two questions: what is the cause of the problem in this case and how to solve it.	Analyze the cause of the situation based on the cultural differences and provide solutions with supporting argument of why they choose to do so.	Students can find out the reason of the failed communication lies in differences of communicating implicitly and explicitly. They will notice that Bob is struggling with the situation because he is loyal to the company while not determined to sacrifice his own interest, which reflects his different cultural backgrounds. Students' solutions may cover two sides of "leave" and "stay", both of which need the effective communication with the company through proper intercultural communicative skills.
Step 4	Summarize students' analysis and solution and point out the features mentioned in the six dimensions by Hofstede	Learn the six dimensions used to describe the national values of a country	Students can easily understand the concept of cultural dimensions based on the cultural differences they perceived in the case.
Step 5	Complete the rest of the cultural dimensions	Improve the solution based on the aspects they haven't thought of	Students will have a better understanding of the case and provide well-developed solutions to the problem.

It is worth pointing out that case-based inquiry learning does not require the "correct answer" and there may not be a standard answer at all [4]. Therefore, the expected performance only predicts the more likely result. In practice, students can propose more

diverse solutions, some of which may have nothing to do with the target content of cultural dimension. In this case, the instructor can include the discussion of new aspects to analyze the cultural differences, which may in turn improve and supplement the theory per se (“Table 1”).

6 Conclusion

Although the method of case study has been frequently adopted in teaching intercultural communication, there lacks the research on the case-based learning of the course from the aspect of IBL instructional design. This paper provides a comprehensive teaching design for the course of cross-cultural business communication by analyzing the learning situation, teaching content, case choice, instructional process, and expected performance. Further study may carry out this instructional design in order to examine the effect of applying inquiry-based learning in teaching the theoretical content in intercultural communication, with a well-developed evaluation system.

Authors’ Contributions. Bingrui Xu performed the case design and wrote the manuscript; Shuimei Pei contributed to the conception of the study and to the preparation of the manuscript.

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