



Intercultural Communicative Teaching in the EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural communicative competence is highly recognized and required for global interaction all over the world these days. Therefore, intercultural communicative teaching is increasingly becoming necessary and significant in foreign language education, especially English teaching in China. To better understand and implement intercultural communicative teaching in the EFL classroom, this paper first differentiates relevant concepts involved in intercultural communicative teaching, then digs more into models of intercultural communicative competence and intercultural communicative teaching approaches, and finally summarizes and reflects on intercultural communicative teaching in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence; intercultural communicative teaching; EFL classroom

1 Introduction

In today's world characterized by globalization, internationalization, diversification and informationization, where English, as an international language, lingua franca, and global language, is used as a means of communication in multicultural contexts. In order to interact with people of different cultural backgrounds effectively and appropriately, one needs to be intercultural communicative competent (Tran & Duong, 2018). Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) helps people survive in this growing multicultural global village. Accordingly, the issue of cultivating learners' ICC has generally been recognized and determined as one of the ultimate goals in the field of foreign language education. Simultaneously, intercultural communicative teaching (ICT) is becoming well-established in education systems across the globe and has attracted increasing government and intergovernmental support.

However, in China, the role of culture and intercultural communication in foreign language education, EFL classroom, in particular, is not always recognized or treated equally in language teaching. There are many problems with ICT in the EFL classroom, two of which are the most prominent. One is to treat cultural teaching as an accessory to language teaching. Culture is usually mentioned or taught when time and conditions permit. Accordingly, cultural teaching is not so systematic that learners often learn fragmentary cultural knowledge and information, which may lead to one-sided or even wrong cognition of the target language. The other is the unclear objectives and incomplete content of culture teaching among language teaching. Many EFL learners and teachers only pay attention to the cultural factors and content that affect communication and interaction in life and thus fail to fully realize the role of foreign language teaching in cultivating learners' humanistic and comprehensive qualities. Consequently, the potential of foreign language teaching is not fully developed.

Therefore, in order to better understand and implement ICT in the EFL classroom, this paper first differentiates relevant concepts involved in ICT, then digs into more into models of ICC and ICT approaches, and finally summarizes and reflects on ICT in the EFL classroom. Based on the systematic understanding of ICT, the author learns more about ICT and expects to teach culture more feasibly in the future.

2 Relevant Concepts Involved in ICT

2.1 Language

Language is such an integral part of our life and humanity that too much about it has been taken for granted. Webster's New World Dictionary offers several most frequently used senses of the word "language", namely, (a) human speech; (b) the ability to communicate by this means; (c) a symbol of vocal sounds and combinations of such sounds to which meaning is attributed, used for the expression or communication of thoughts and feelings; (d) the written representation of such a system (Hu, 2017). Hu (2017) mentioned in his Linguistics that human language has the following frequently discussed design features, namely, arbitrariness, duality, creativity, and displacement, which further determine the complexity of language teaching. Liddicoat et al. (2003) regarded language as a symbol system made of words which are encoded by sounds or graphic conventions and arranged by the rules of syntax, and as a communication system which carries a set of practices deployed in context to achieve meaning. To give a simple but complete definition, language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication. Without language, people even in a small group are unable to connect and work together, not to mention the whole world.

2.2 Culture

Culture is a notoriously difficult concept to define. Generally, culture is a complex system of concepts, attitudes, values, beliefs, conventions, behaviours, practices, rituals, and lifestyles of the people who make up a cultural group, as well as the artefacts they produce and the institutions they create (Liddicoat et al, 2003). Culture in this sense is a collective term that encompasses all aspects of our lives. Specifically, different scholars share diverse definitions and classifications of culture. Byram (2008) used a well-known metaphor to illustrate the notion of culture which is that of the iceberg where only a small proportion of culture is above the surface of the sea and visible. Normally, it is such high culture as food, dress, sports and folk traditions, etc. associated with national phenomena that constitute the conscious part. Below the surface, there is much more to the iceberg of culture, and here we come across matters of implicit assumptions about values, relationships among people, etc. Besides, Byram also considered culture as rule-governed behaviour because it allows us to make complex concepts in the unconscious part of the iceberg explicit for learners. Bennettet al. (2003) discussed the Big C and the little c to distinguish which culture to teach. The Big C (objective culture) refers to the visible, abstract and theoretical aspects of culture like social, cultural and historical institutions as well as aspects of geography, politics and arts. The little c (subjective culture) refers to the comparatively tangible and practical aspects of culture like greetings, eating habits, rituals and "everyday situations", etc.

In order to facilitate ICT, it is better to define and classify culture as a such, explicit culture on one hand and implicit culture on the other hand. Combined with the concepts by Byram and Bennett, explicit culture is associated with tangible and visible national phenomena, such as festivals, food, dress, music, arts, history, greeting, table manners, body language, and everything that is conscious in our lives. Implicit culture, however, is something like social norms or rules that are different from different groups, including attitudes, values, the relationship among people, etc. Only by defining and categorizing culture, can we better decide which culture and the way to teach learners.

2.3 Intercultural Communicative Competence

Evolved from Dell Hymes's definition of communicative competence, including linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and fluency, ICC is a burgeoning and necessary competence required for successful international interaction nowadays. As for the definition of ICC, in fact, some scholars equate ICC with intercultural competence (IC). For example, Yang and Zhuang (2007) believed that equalizing ICC with IC is beneficial to liberate our concepts from the narrow vision of communication, and thus pay attention to the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence. Simultaneously, we can also realize the importance of intercultural awareness, thinking ability, non-verbal communication and communication strategies. However, Byram (1997) distinguished IC from ICC, suggesting that for IC, individuals have the ability to interact in their own language with people from another country and culture while someone with ICC is able to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language. Similarly, Wen (2004) suggested that ICC includes two parts: communicative competence and IC. Communicative competence includes linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, and flexibility while IC includes sensitivity and tolerance to cultural differences, as well as the flexibility to deal with cultural differences. In view of the fact that most of the relevant statements do not distinguish between these two competencies, this article tends to treat the two formulations as the same and defines ICC as the ability to understand cultures, including your own, and use this understanding to communicate with people from other cultures successfully. It is about culture and communication. Whereas, as usual, there is more to it than that. It is about how we understand another culture and how we use this understanding to communicate with others, who are not from the same culture as us.

3 Models of ICC

From different views on ICC, it is seen that various models of ICC have been proposed to address many aspects of ICC, e.g., the model of ICC (Byram, 1997); updated DMIS model (J M. Bennett & M J. Bennett, 2004); pyramid model of IC (Deardorff, 2006). Byram's (1997) model of ICC is one of the most comprehensive frameworks to develop and evaluate learners' ICC in a different context. In his model, ICC consists of five elements, namely, attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Among these five components, attitudes and knowledge factors are preconditions. The nature of the processes is a function of the skills which a person brings to the interaction. Critical awareness is the central part of ICC which encourages learners to reflect critically on the values, beliefs, and behaviours of their own countries. Based on this model, Byram formulated corresponding and specific educational objectives for each item which are designed for language and culture learning and serve as guiding criteria to develop and assess learners' ICC in the foreign language class.

Respect to Bennett et al.'s (2004) updated DMIS model, which describes six developmental stages of intercultural sensitivity and communication, moving from denial of, defence from and minimization of cultural difference (ethnocentric stages) to acceptance, adaptation and integration of difference (ethnic-relative stages). For all of the above-mentioned stages, they suggest a framework that parallels the different levels of language proficiency as given in the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Proficiency Guidelines where students at different levels of

language proficiency are categorized as being at Novice, Intermediate, or Advanced stages of language learning (see Figure 1). With the help of this model, they hope to help foreign language teachers in making cultural competence an integral and effective part of the foreign language learning process.

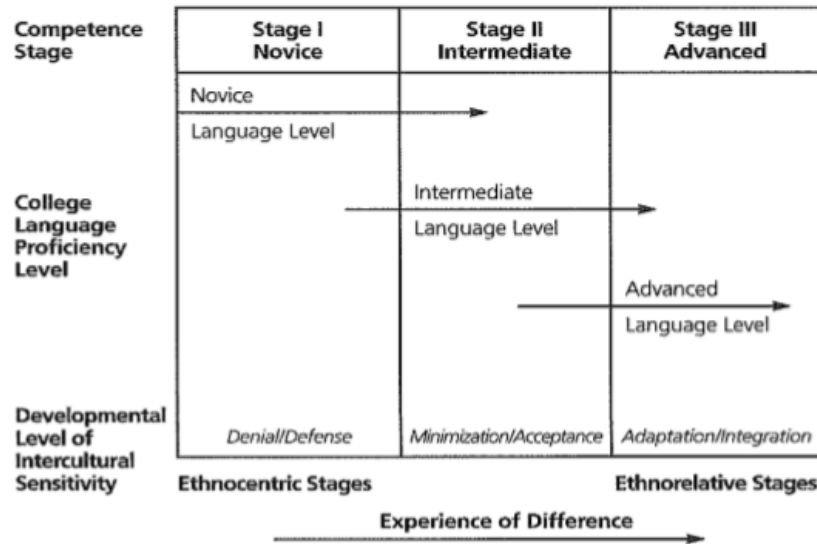


Figure 1: Development of intercultural sensitivity

Regarding Deardorff’s (2006) pyramid model of IC which is a research-based one, it has two other different elements of internal outcomes and external outcomes apart from the three elements of attitudes, knowledge and skills as in Byram’s (1997) model. All of these five elements are arranged in levels of the pyramid lower levels of which are the basis to enhance the higher ones (see Figure 2).

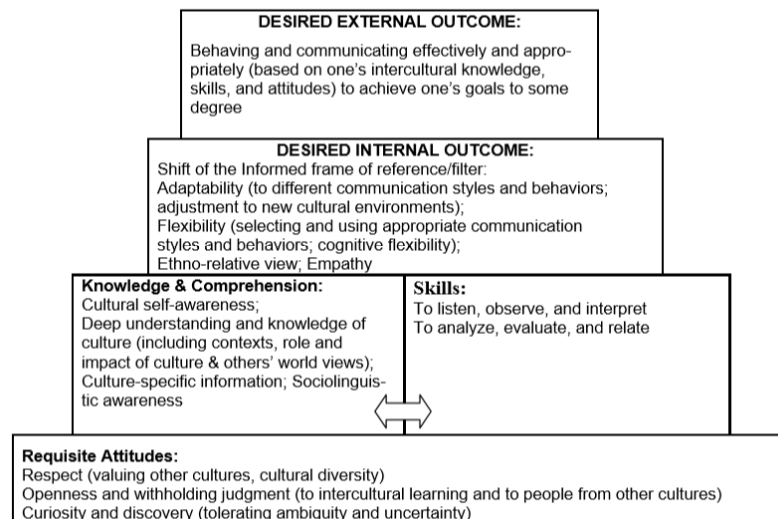


Figure 2: Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence

These three models of ICC introduce us to the key components and developmental stages for cultivating learners’ ICC. They broaden the author’s horizons toward cultural/intercultural teaching

and learning. Prior to this, the author thought that cultural/intercultural teaching and learning only intend to teach students to inherit and promote their own cultures, to understand and learn from foreign excellent cultures, to select the essence and discard the dross. However, this is only a small part of cultural/intercultural teaching and learning—attitudes. As for ICT in the EFL classroom, teachers should not only inspire students' attitudes toward intercultural communication, but also impart their relevant knowledge and skills, cultivate their intercultural communication awareness, and constantly encourage them to reflect on their intercultural communication stage, take action and gradually become an excellent intercultural speaker.

4 ICT in the EFL Classroom

When talking about ICT in the EFL classroom, many teachers would be confused about the position of language and culture, as well as with the identities of the teachers themselves and students in teaching and learning. Two prominent problems in cultural teaching and the definitions of language and culture have been mentioned in the previous section, and here the relationship between language and culture as well as the identities of teachers and students in ICT will be discussed in order to make the teaching ideas and process of ICT clearer for foreign language teachers.

4.1 Relationship between Language and Culture in ICT

The relationship between language and culture has been studied for many years and across a range of interrelated disciplines, such as sociolinguistics, social semiotics, communication studies, and cultural studies (Zafar et al., 2013). Language is related to all features of human life in society. And comprehension of the surrounding culture is key to learning a language. The language also allows for the development and evolution of cultural values. In a word, language and culture are inextricably related. Liddicoat et al. (2003) also claimed that language does not function independently from the context in which it is used. As in the field of ICT, culture has never been divorced from foreign language teaching, but demonstrates in different ways according to different historical stages of foreign language teaching. In the early stage, culture existed in works, and cultural teaching in EFL classrooms basically revolved around high culture. During the 1970s and 1980s, culture existed in various communication occasions, and low culture has become the focus of teaching. These two stages have one thing in common, that is, cultural teaching is subordinate to language teaching, and the former serves the latter. Since the 21st century, foreign language teaching has undergone tremendous changes. Intercultural education should not be subordinate to foreign language teaching but be organically combined with language teaching (Zhang, 2012). For the author, language is not only a part of the culture but also a basic means of intercultural communication; and culture enriches language, making language teaching and learning more real and vivid.

4.2 Identities of Teachers and Students in ICT

As is known and emphasized to all, teachers play the leading and influential role in the classroom while students do not enter the classroom with empty minds. Accordingly, Liddicoat et al. (2003) put forward two critical concepts, namely, intraculturality and interculturality. Intraculturality refers to one's knowing and learning of own language(s) and culture(s) and one's knowing and learning of target language(s) and culture(s) is referred to as Interculturality. For ICT in the EFL classroom, pedagogy begins with teachers' intraculturality which interrelates and connects with their

interculturality. At the same time, the existing intraculturality and interculturality of students should also be considered before teaching. In particular, as the modern Internet society is developed, and mobile phones have basically been popularized, students are provided with a variety of learning channels. They can learn about many world cultures through the Internet, and even may know more than teachers. Hence, in ICT, teachers are more to help students learn to distinguish and cultivate critical intercultural thinking. The identities of the two in ICT are more flexible and multiple.

4.3 ICT Approaches in the EFL Classroom

Approaches to culture in language teaching and learning are many and varied. A promising approach is what is termed “intercultural language teaching”, which Liddicoat (2004) defines as follows:

Intercultural language teaching places the need to communicate in the first place and seeks to teach culture in a way which develops intercultural communicative skills at the same time as developing language skills. This is an approach to the teaching of culture which sees language and culture as intimately linked and recognizes that culture is always present when we use language.

As such, intercultural language learning is best understood not as something to be added to teaching and learning but rather, as something that is integral to the interactions that already and inevitably take place in the classroom and beyond. Liddicoat et al. (2003) propose a set of principles which provide a starting point for developing an intercultural pedagogy, including active construction, making connections, interaction, reflecting, and responsibility. Each of these principles requires development into practice. This practice can be conceptualized as a series of four interrelated processes of noticing, comparing, reflecting and interacting (see Figure 3).

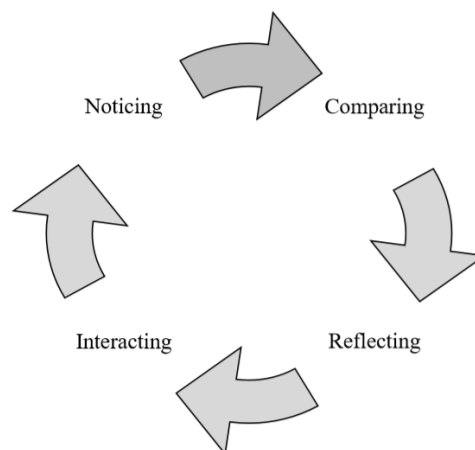


Figure 3: Interacting processes of intercultural pedagogy

The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) model is a fresh educational model proposed by the European Union that combines subject knowledge and foreign language learning (Sheng, 2012). It does not translate the first language into another language, nor does it simply teach related content or subjects in the target language other than the native language. CLIL model has five essential elements, namely context (particular situation of communication), content (subject matter), communication (language), cognition (learning and thinking) and culture (social awareness of self and otherness), referred to as the 5Cs framework (see Figure 4) (Coyle, 2007). It takes account of “integration” on different levels: learning (content and cognition), language learning

(communication and cultures) and intercultural experiences. Culture(s) permeates the whole. This model inspires me a lot in that teachers actually can teach language in a certain context, for example, the prescriptive drinking age in law in different countries, which in fact contains different cultures about the law in different countries. Without rigid requirements of language drills or other language practice, instead, students are curious about the law knowledge and learn the language and culture implicitly.

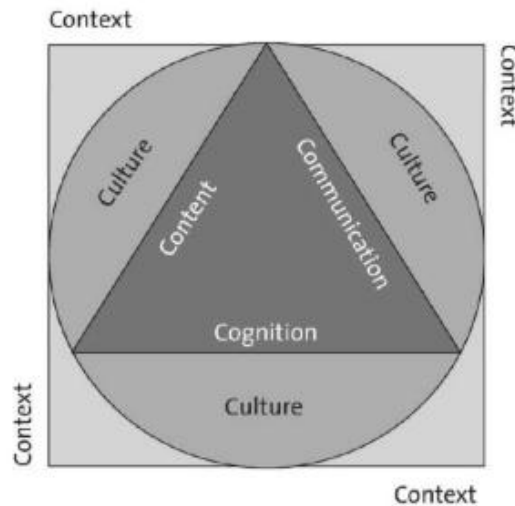


Figure 4: The 5Cs Framework

Zhang and Yao (2020) proposed a theoretical intercultural framework based on the needs and characteristics of students' intercultural competence development in the Chinese context, including four perspectives (communicative behaviour, interpersonal relationship, cultural conflict and identity), three dimensions (cognition, attitudes, skills), two contexts (life and work) and one platform (foreign language teaching). Cooperated with five intercultural education experts, Zhang and Yao put forward an integrated Model for Chinese Students' Intercultural Competence Development(IMCSICD) (see Figure 5).

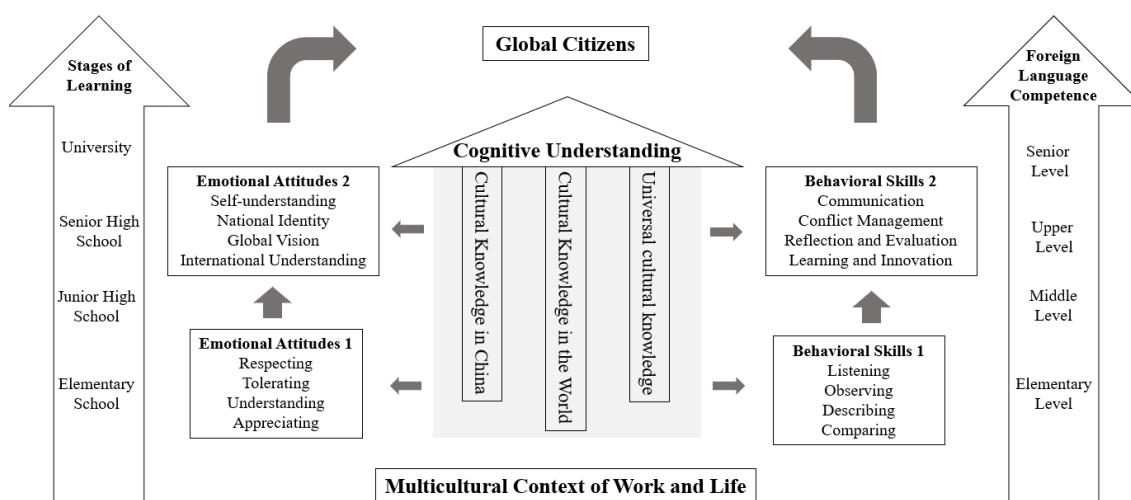


Figure 5 Integrated Model for Chinese Students' Intercultural Competence Development

5 Conclusion

Different scholars have diverse understandings and suggestions for ICT in the EFL classroom. However, there is no perfect one that can be designated as the only ICT model in the EFL classroom. Liddicoat's approach seems to talk about how to teach intercultural in a macro way without illustrating specific details of ICT while the European CLIL model and Zhang and Yao's IMCSICD demonstrate the key elements to be considered without a concrete teaching process for ICT. Therefore, based on reflection and integration, the author suggests that foreign language teachers can combine all the models of ICC and ICT approaches together to achieve more feasible teaching for ICT in the EFL classroom. First of all, teachers should make clear in mind what culture is and the key elements of ICC as well as learn about students' existing intraculturality and interculturality. Second, pedagogy starts by helping students notice cultural similarities and differences in a particular context. Third, providing students with specific, real and practical content require students to use language to learn practical knowledge or deal with practical tasks in a particular real context, such as comparison and interaction with classmates to talk about cultural similarities and differences. Last but not least, applying some assessment forms that help students to reflect their attitudes towards culture and intercultural well as self-check their developmental stages of ICC.

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