

An Empirical Study of Process-oriented Intercultural Teaching in Chinese College English Classroom

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Abstract—The cultivation of students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is one of the main objectives of College English teaching in China. The present study aims to construct the Process-oriented intercultural teaching mode for promoting college students' ICC grounded in the current reality of cultural teaching in Chinese College English course and presents an empirical analysis of the effects of Process-oriented intercultural teaching in Chinese College English classroom. The results of the analysis indicate that the Process-oriented intercultural teaching is more effective than the traditional cultural teaching in enhancing the students' affective and behavioral dimensions of ICC and gained significantly higher satisfaction among teacher and students.

Index Terms—intercultural communicative competence, process-oriented intercultural teaching, Chinese College English classroom

I. INTRODUCTION

The reality of globalization, the increasing interconnection among countries, cultural diversity, and the establishment of English's status of becoming the world's universal language have advanced new requirements for College English teaching in China toward fostering and promoting students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC). College English (CE) is an English-language course offered to non-English majors in 1,983 universities in mainland China. As of 2004, there were about 50,000 Chinese English teachers teaching CE to an estimated 19,000,000 students (Du, 2012). The Chinese National Curriculum of College English Teaching (2007) issued by Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) indicates that one of the important goals of CE teaching is to improve college students' general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges. Yet earlier studies (Chen Guiqin, 2014; Shen Yue, 2014) have found that although many scholars and Chinese university EFL teachers have realized the importance of integrating ICC with the CE classroom, Chinese college students are found far lag behind in their ICC in contrast to their linguistic competence. Intercultural teaching in Chinese CE course is a long-term extension of the traditional system of a linguistic knowledge-centered teaching mode, focusing primarily on imparting cultural knowledge and the ICC-related activities in class usually serve as the aid to teach basic language skills. In this approach to teaching, teachers are primary information givers of target cultural contents, whereas students are passive recipients of the information.

Many Chinese scholars and EFL teachers endeavor to change the status quo of cultural teaching: Hu wenzhong (2013) points out the cultivation of ICC requires work both on and off campus and direct contact with foreign cultures. Zhang weidong (2012) constructs a systematic framework of ICC for foreign language teaching (FLT) in China. Liu Xuehui (2003) suggests that an explicit approach and an implicit approach from the constructive perspective should be combined in the cultural teaching. These research reports provide in-depths insights with regards to the cultural teaching in China, but they still have been confined to the theoretical perspectives and inductive methods, which failed to address the issues of intercultural teaching in CE classroom. International researchers utilize various teaching approaches and strategies to improve cultural learning in students. Several case studies were conducted (Otten, 2003; Smith 1997) in classroom with a mix of domestic and international students enrolled to explore the students' intercultural learning experience. Byram & Zarate (1994), Kramsch (1998) and Byran et al. (2001) stressed a process-oriented pedagogy for intercultural learning. The cultural portfolio project also has been conducted and implemented in Korean, French, German and Taiwan language classrooms, which is considered as the practical and meaningful way to improve the learners' intercultural understanding (Byon 2007; Allen 2004; Abrams 2002; Su 2011). However, how is the process-oriented pedagogy incorporated in the Chinese CE intercultural teaching and will it be effective in the Chinese classroom settings? The current study aims to answer the question and fills the gap in this respect.

II. PROCESS-ORIENTED INTERCULTURAL TEACHING

A. Theoretical Framework

The triangular model of ICC developed by Chen and Starosta (1998&2000), Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and constructivism frame the research study and prove to be the theoretical foundation of Process-oriented Intercultural teaching mode.

Chen and Starosta (1998, p.4) define ICC as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors to elicit a desired response in a specific environment". They highlight the importance of intercultural speakers' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures and behave in negotiation with their cultural identity. Although other researchers put forward different definition of ICC, this study employed Chen & Starosta's framework of ICC for the following two reasons. First, their opinions of the objectives and assessment of ICC in the FLT classroom have great pedagogical significance and provide enormous guidance for researches that attempt to find effective methods of ICC cultivation. Plus, the scales of ICC based on this conceptual framework show good validity and reliability. According to Chen and Starosta (2000, p3), "ICC is comprised of cognitive, affective and behavioral ability of interactants in the process of intercultural communication". To be specific, the cognitive aspect of ICC refers to "the understanding of culture conventions that affect how we think and behave" (Chen&Starosta, 1998, p.9). The affective dimension of ICC means the subjects' "active desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate and accept differences among cultures" (Chen&Starosta, 1998, p. 231). And the behavioral aspect of ICC refers to "the ability of get the job done and attain communication goals in intercultural interactions" (Chen&Starosta, 1996, p. 367). Kolb(1984, p.41) proposes that learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience." It is a combination of both how learners approach a task and how learners respond to and assimilate the experience.

B. Construction of Process-oriented Intercultural Teaching Mode

The limitations and problems of traditional intercultural teaching in CE classroom can be easily detected in the light of the above mentioned discussions which emphasize the significance of students' positive experience and construction their own knowledge structures. First, the traditional knowledge-centered teaching mode puts emphasis on the intercultural knowledge infusion whereas how to raise students' cultural sensitivity, how to develop students' positive emotion and communication skills in the intercultural interactions are generally passed over. Cultural teaching is still subordinate to language teaching in CE classroom. Another drawback to this passive cultural teaching is that great attentions are paid to teaching target cultural facts while the home cultures teaching are absent in the teaching practice. In comparison to the traditional teaching, Process-oriented intercultural teaching mode encourages students to critically and actively engage in classroom activities and motivates them to explore different cultures so as to develop their cultural awareness and communication skills through their own work and cooperative learning with peers. In the Process-oriented mode, home cultures and target cultures are given equal importance.

Based on the previous analysis of existing researches and theoretical support, this study constructs Process-oriented intercultural teaching mode in accordance with the actual CE teaching in China. It consists of three parts-experiencing cultures authentically, exploring cultures comparatively and rethinking cultures critically. Unlike the traditional teaching procedures in linear and sequential way, the three parts interplay and compose a dynamic and systematic teaching model. In the section of experiencing cultures authentically, students are encouraged to be immersed in the natural cultural setting through the use of a variety of authentic materials. They are inspired to identify the culture issues with their own life experience based on the topics of the textbook. Experiencing cultures emphasizes the personal involvement and immersion in cultural issues of China as well as English speaking countries. Exploring cultures comparatively is a crucial part in helping students to present research questions after reading research-based materials and form their own independent perception. The purpose of rethinking cultures is to encourage students to break or modify the cultural stereotypes and correct or intensify their understanding of western and Chinese cultures after reflection and interaction based on the peer and teacher assessment.

III. METHOD

A. Research Questions

This study is supported by a semester-long teaching experiment designed to examine the effectiveness of Process-oriented intercultural teaching mode in Chinese CE class on the basis of the case study of Shanghai Dianji University. Three research questions are posed: 1. Is Process-oriented intercultural teaching mode effective in the improvement of students' ICC in cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains? 2. What are the students' and teachers' opinions about the Process-oriented intercultural teaching mode in CE class? 3. What improvements could be made to CE course so as to better cultivate students' ICC?

B. Participants

This research is conducted in two first-year classes of Shanghai Dianji University and all participants major in International Economics and Trade in their second semester. According to College English Curriculum Requirements (2007), students with this major are required to complete 4-semester's college English course with 16 credits. The two classes were randomly divided into experimental class (EC for short) and control class (CC for short) respectively.

In order to ensure the reliability of the research, the following measures were taken: First, the two classes have almost the same overall English proficiency on the final test at the end of the first semester with the average score of 78.3 and 79.1 respectively. The mean age of two classes is 18.3 and 18.5, which is not significantly different. The number of both classes is almost the same with 38 students in EC (16 males, 22 females) and 39 students in CC (13 males, 26 females). Second, both classes were taught by the same English teacher and used the same textbook: 21 Century College English published by Fudan University Press. Third, both groups had the same number of teaching hours: there were altogether 72 periods distributed in 18 weeks, that is, 4 periods per week.

C. Procedures

In the experimental class, the Process-oriented intercultural teaching mode was employed. During the first class, the teacher described the research by explaining the purpose of study and informed the students of the objectives, contents and assessment of the course. The teacher created a web group discussion forum with QQ and provided the students a list of readings and internet resources. The learning strategies and methods were introduced to the EC students in class. Students were randomly divided into different study groups of 4-5 students during every unit study. In the stage of experiencing cultures, theme-related materials including videos like movie clips, Ted talks and reading materials were given in order to provide students with opportunity to observe and experience the authentic cultural contexts. In the second phase, each study group was required to choose a particular research problem related to the topic in each unit. The research can either make a comparison of Chinese and western cultures or give an in-depth exploration of Chinese traditional culture. For example, when students studied the text of unit 2 "Why They Excel", different research questions were raised with the teacher's help- "What are differences between American and Chinese parenting styles?", "What the U.S. and Chinese school systems have in common?", "Are Chinese more family-oriented than Americans?", "How has Confucianism influenced Chinese society?" etc. Students are encouraged to use different approaches to form their opinions and insights with a variety of perspectives through personal involvement and keen observation. Some of them conducted online questionnaires or interviews with Americans. In the reflection stage, students presented research reports online or gave oral presentations in class, and the rest of students brainstormed and discussed in class or posted a response online on discussion forum. Students' roles varied from stage to stage within different activities. At the end of each unit students were graded through peer and teacher assessments.

D. Instruments

Data were collected through qualitative and quantitative methods and four instruments were administered to the respondents in order to examine the effectiveness of Process-oriented intercultural teaching.

1. Pre and Post Tests

All the students from EC and CC were required to take the socio-cultural tests at the beginning and the end of semester. The tests were 50 minutes long and the first 25 question items were designed to evaluate student's command of Chinese cultural knowledge and another 25 questions were concerning the cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries, which covered many aspects of cultures that college students are supposed to be familiar with. The total score of the test paper was 50 points. The tests were designed based on the "Culture Test Model" proposed by Valette (1977), the "Social-Cultural Test" proposed by Wang Zhenya (1990) and the "English Pragmatic Competence Investigation" by He Ziran's (1988).

2. Self-report Scales

The self-report scale was derived and adapted from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale designed by Chen and Starosta (2000), Intercultural Effectiveness Scale by Portalla and Chen (2010) and ICCSRS developed by Zhong Hua (2013), which aimed to measure students' ICC from the perspective of affect and behavior. It should be noted that some of the statements were rewritten for better use in accordance with actual situations in China. Given the impact of language barrier, statements were written both in Chinese and English. The first 20 items were designed to measure intercultural sensitivity while the rest of 20 items were used to determine students' ICC from behavioral dimension. The 40-item scale utilized a 5-point Likert-type rating scale with responses ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). They were conducted in both classes before and after the study.

3. Satisfaction Questionnaire and Semi-structured Interviews

Satisfaction questionnaire was implemented at the end of the semester and distributed to EC. The semi-structured interviews were conducted among the teacher of this course and 15 students chosen randomly in EC. The main focus of student interviews was to obtain a deeper understanding of how the students think about the Process-oriented intercultural teaching they were engaged in and how it influences their English learning. The interview questions for teacher mainly focus on the comparison between the two different teaching modes, the problems he encountered during implementing the mode and his suggestions on how to improve it.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the aforementioned research questions, the results are displayed in two parts: 1. the changes of students' ICC from the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions; 2. students and teacher's views towards the Process-oriented intercultural teaching and reflections on improving the teaching practice.

A. The Change in Cognitive Aspect of ICC

From the descriptive statistics in table 1, you can see that there is no significant difference between these two groups on the cognitive ICC achievements. That is to say, compared with the traditional teaching mode, the Process-oriented intercultural teaching is not clearly more effective to increase students' cognitive dimension of ICC in a certain time. Perhaps this is because question items in the pre and post tests are based on rote memorization instead of comprehension and application level questions. And the Process-oriented intercultural teaching emphasizes the process of inquiry and cooperation in learning and encourages students to gain a deep insight into cultural phenomena through active engagement, in-depth exploration and critical thinking. The result indicates that this teaching paradigm is not more efficient in obtaining factual information in comparison with traditional direct instruction teaching, which should be improved in the future.

TABLE 1
INDEPENDENCE T-TEST RESULTS OF PRE AND POST-TESTS BETWEEN EG AND CG

| Group | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | Levene's Test for Equality of variances Sig. | t-test for Equality of Means Sig.(2-tailed) |
|-----------|----|----|---------|----------------|--------------------|--|---|
| Pre-test | EC | 38 | 38.1316 | 3.71390 | .60247 | .321 | .869 |
| Cognitive | CC | 39 | 38.2821 | 4.26089 | .68229 | | |
| Post-test | EC | 38 | 39.8421 | 4.20120 | .68152 | .453 | .387 |
| Cognitive | CC | 39 | 38.9487 | 4.77906 | .76526 | | |

However after analyzing the online discussion forum posts and oral presentations in class, we found that the students have expanded and deepened their understandings by modifying or eliminating cultural stereotypes, and this result is in agreement with previous findings (Byon, 2007; Su, 2011). Admittedly, cultural stereotypes are helpful in shaping attitudes and behaviors toward other races and cultures in some respects, but more often than not it involves false or misleading generalizations which would have detrimental effect on social interaction and communication. At the early phase of the research, students seldom realized the diversity and complexity of culture and the specific communication situations in the real interactions were always ignored. The incorrect and inadequate perception may be generated due to the knowledge from the outdated textbooks or the distorted vision of the reality gained from the TV series. In the Process-oriented intercultural teaching paradigm, students began to have conscious awareness of the existing or potential subcultures and sense the media and popular culture within a large complex culture. Meanwhile they paid closer attention to role of the concrete communication situations in cross-cultural interactions. The following quotations show specific example of the cognitive change before and after the research.

1. Group A Research question: What a typical American breakfast like?

We interviewed 20 Americans online and they gave me a huge variety of answers. After summarizing their answers, we found that cereal, bacon and eggs are maybe the most common breakfast food. The interviewees told me that lots of young folks always skip their breakfast...lots of people buy their breakfast on their way to work, for example muffin, burger, donuts, croissant, biscuit or something similar and coffee. Lots of people have turned to eating fast food for breakfast and they hit the drive thru for breakfast. That's why there are a lot of popular fast food breakfast chain stores like McDonald, subway, Chick-fil-A, Burger King, Donut King, Jack in the Box etc. ...Meanwhile, we realize the breakfast foods vary wildly from region to region. For example, we are told that southerners like grits, ham and eggs. Some of them prefer Mexican food like taco, burrito. While West coast people are into granola, fruit and yogurt. A friend I surveyed is from New York, and he told me that in New York, a typical breakfast may consist of eggs, toast (white, rye or wheat), home fries (potatoes fried on a griddle with onions and sometimes peppers) and breakfast meat (bacon, ham or sausage). They all love pancakes, French toast, waffle etc. and some immigrant families still continue the kinds of eating that they ate in their country of origin. ... (Oral report)

2. Student A

I have always thought that Chinese college students have higher academic pressure than American counterparts and college life there is relaxing and lazy. Li kai's presentation lets me realize that American college students also experience high level of academic stress due to challenging courses, peer competition, parents' expectation and self-esteem etc... (Response post online)

These above excerpts demonstrate that students reconstructed their existing knowledge and realized the dynamics and complex dimensions of cultures through exploration and communication.

B. The Change in Affective Aspect of ICC

It can clearly be seen from the table 2 that students' ICC on affective domain was not significantly different before the study between the two classes while the post-test result was significant. It indicates that the Process-oriented intercultural teaching has significantly contributed to the promotion of affective aspect of ICC.

TABLE 2
INDEPENDENCE T-TEST RESULTS OF SELF-REPORT SCALE BETWEEN EG AND CG

| Group | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error | Levene's Test for Equality of variances | t-test for Equality of Means |
|---------------------|----|----|---------|----------------|------------|---|------------------------------|
| | | | | | Mean | Sig. | Sig. (2-tailed) |
| Pre-test Affective | EC | 38 | 56.8421 | 18.15776 | 2.94558 | .534 | .958 |
| | CC | 39 | 57.0513 | 16.69218 | 2.67289 | | |
| Post-test Affective | EC | 38 | 70.1053 | 14.60061 | 2.36853 | .944 | .004 |
| | CC | 39 | 59.8205 | 15.79452 | 2.52915 | | |

Fred Jandt (2013) argues that people normally can have no direct knowledge of a culture other than their own. Their experience with and knowledge of other cultures are limited by the perceptual bias of their own cultures. People tend to use their own culture as a benchmark or lens to evaluate others, which sometimes pose barriers to intercultural interactions. The oral and written reports revealed that at the early stage of the study, some students showed negative attitudes towards different aspects of target culture and lacked of tolerance for conflicting views. After exploration and communication with native speakers, they have become more willing to recognize, accept and appreciate diverse views and gradually developed a more positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences, which promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication (Chen & Starosta, 1997). Some students told me during the interviews that “I now realized that it is inappropriate to say a culture is superior or inferior to ours.” “In the past, I focused too much on cultural differences rather than similarities, now I gradually realized that there are more similarities than differences across many countries”.

ICC emphasizes the mediation between different cultures and requires the ability of interacting with people with multiple identities and their own identity. That is to say, students should be mindful of the cultural differences and gain a deeper understanding of both their own and target cultures (Bryam, M., Gribkova, B., & Starkey, H, 2002). Fantini (2000) describes intercultural experience as a “double-edged” nature” because “the development of competence in another culture and proficiency in its language provide the opportunity for powerful reflections into one’s own native world view. (p.26)” However, a large number of students suffered from a serious “aphasia of Chinese culture” (Cong, 2000). They were unfamiliar with Chinese traditional culture and also found it difficult to express Chinese culture in English. Some of them even looked down upon Chinese culture and unconditionally accepted and admired the “beautiful” and “exotic” characteristics of a foreign culture. During the interview, teacher confessed that “I seldom introduce the Chinese culture knowledge in traditional class because the textbook does not contain any Chinese cultural materials and contents.” However, the results from the students’ interviews and students’ oral and written report suggest that through gathering information from library, internet and native speakers, they have increased their understanding of Chinese culture and showed more confidence in expressing Chinese culture in English.

C. The Change in Behavioral Aspect of ICC

As shown in the table 3, there is a significant difference within EC before and after the study while there is no significant difference within CC. The statistical significance between EC and CC illustrates that there is a significant increase in students’ ICC on behavioral perspective under the Process-oriented Intercultural teaching paradigm.

TABLE 3
INDEPENDENCE T-TEST RESULTS OF SELF-REPORT SCALE BETWEEN EG AND CG

| Group | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error | Levene's Test for Equality of variances | t-test for Equality of Means |
|----------------------|----|----|---------|----------------|------------|---|------------------------------|
| | | | | | Mean | Sig. | Sig. (2-tailed) |
| Pre-test Behavioral | EC | 38 | 38.6053 | 4.04394 | .65601 | .133 | .749 |
| | CC | 39 | 38.8718 | 3.19687 | .51191 | | |
| Post-test Behavioral | EC | 38 | 42.4211 | 4.05124 | .65720 | .665 | .002 |
| | CC | 39 | 39.5128 | 3.91940 | .62761 | | |

Traditional cultural teaching focused more on the target cultural contents rather than the process of constructing meaningful knowledge. However, in many cases, cultural knowledge that students acquired cannot be automatically and directly transformed into ICC. In Process-oriented intercultural teaching approach, students take for their own responsibility to collect and share information, report and exemplify cultural behaviors. Initially, most of students were in extreme need of instructional scaffolding and helps from teacher. Later, they became more confident in carrying out intercultural tasks. By going through the process of specifying, exploring and analyzing their research questions, students actively constructed their own profound and long-lasting understanding of the culture. Students are not passive recipients of knowledge and teaching content any longer, but active constructors of knowledge; and teachers have changed from knowledge imparters to the assistants and guides that focus mainly on counseling and helping students to construct meaning. Through interactions with teacher, classmates and native speakers, students enhanced their language proficiency and reduced the anxiety and psychological distress in intercultural encounters. They also acquired and honed good communication skills which help to overcome the difficulty that sometimes arises when interacting with people from different cultures.

The post-questionnaires, written reports and students' reflective postings online reveal that students show more empathy than before and they are more sensitive to others. They are more willing to recognize, accept and appreciate diversity. They are more receptive to interacting with culturally different. A student's post online said that he felt curious and inspired by talking with people with different cultural background. Another student mentioned that she realized that contents of cultural learning should not be confined to only inner circle countries, she once met a friend from Norway but her limited knowledge about this country hindered their communication. It proves that Process-oriented Intercultural teaching helps stimulate their interest in real communication and as a result improve their communication skills.

D. Students and Teacher's Attitudes towards Process-oriented Intercultural Teaching

Through data statistics of interviews and the satisfaction questionnaire, we can conclude that both the teacher and the EG students have positive attitudes towards Process-oriented Intercultural teaching.

The teacher affirmed that in Process-oriented intercultural teaching, students' enthusiasm for learning English was greatly increased by the cultural exploration activities and students were given more chance to express and exchange their own opinions so as to improve their written and oral language proficiency. But the teacher claimed that the rigid College English syllabus, lack of suitable textbooks, limited teaching hours and large classes, insufficient language environment resources or opportunities like fieldwork all stand in the way of effective business English teaching, which need to be refined or modified in the next round of teaching.

As for the students, 86% of them (43/50) are content with the process-oriented intercultural teaching with 56% extremely satisfied and 30% satisfied. The findings of interviews are consistent with—but more extensive than—the result of post-questionnaire. During interview, 12 students deem that “the teaching method helps them to construct their own meaning”, “classroom activities and discussions online is interesting and rewarding”. During interviews, 2 students expressed concerns and doubts. 1 student showed concern over the CET-4 test result, because the course did not touch upon the test-taking strategies. Another student felt uncomfortable with this new method, because “his English is not good enough for the course and he found it difficult to discover the research topics independently”. It reflects that teacher must adopt systematic and structured approach and help learners to express and respond to their cultural learning experiences (Choudhury, R. U., 2014). It can be seen that teacher's role is more crucial rather than diminished in the new teaching paradigm.

V. CONCLUSION

The study constructs the Process-oriented intercultural teaching mode for promoting college students' ICC grounded in the current reality of cultural teaching in Chinese CE course and has implemented a comparative experiment in Shanghai Dianji University. According to the previous statistics and analysis, we can summarize that Process-oriented intercultural teaching is comparatively more effective than traditional teaching in the context of CE classroom and does make significant difference to the students' ICC on affective and behavioral perspectives in the Experimental Class after the study. In addition, Process-oriented intercultural teaching urges students to be more active, interested and confident in learning English than before and it gains significantly higher satisfaction among teacher and students. As this study intends a tentative study on the application of Process-oriented intercultural teaching mode in CE class, the research was only conducted on a small scale. In order to provide sufficient and more convincing data on the positive effects of Process-oriented intercultural teaching, more research work on a larger scale is expected in the future.

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