

Analysis of Intercultural Competence in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract:

As the process of globalization, intercultural communication has become a part of people's daily life. People need to know how to behave appropriately and effectively in a certain intercultural context. So, cultivating students' intercultural competence plays a vital role in foreign language teaching and learning. This paper first gives the definition of culture and intercultural competence, and then it analyzes the intercultural competence in foreign language teaching and learning.

Keywords:

Intercultural Competence, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Foreign Language Teaching

1. Introduction

As the rapid development of technology and globalization, people get more chances to meet different people from different countries and cultures. So, communication among various cultures becomes the symbol of the time. And intercultural competence becomes more and more important. Intercultural communication is a kind of interactive behavior in which people try to maintain their cultural identity and know other cultures, so as to keep a better relationship with people who come from other different countries and cultures. There is no doubt that speaking a fluent foreign language can promote the intercultural communication, but knowing the culture of the target language is an integrated part of intercultural communication. The standard of curriculum has a deep consideration to the cultivating the intercultural competence and has a specific design of it which reflects on the description of cultural awareness.

According to Standard of English Curriculum of Compulsory Education, the humanity of English curriculum reflects in helping students broaden their horizon, experience life and formulate intercultural awareness [1]. Now, the four core qualities are emphasized in compulsory education, which are language competence, thinking quality, cultural awareness, and learning ability. Cultivating students' cultural awareness that is to cultivate students' intercultural communicative competence and guide students to use the language appropriately according to the cultural background, on the premise of understanding and respecting the cultural background of both sides

of the communication so as to achieve the purpose of communication. However, many teachers can realize the importance of intercultural competence, but they lack the guidance of theory and methodology. In the past 40 years, effective research has been achieved on studying what the intercultural competence is, how to cultivate the intercultural competence and how to assess the intercultural competence [2].

2. Overview of Intercultural Competence Research

When involving the intercultural competence, many related concepts should be emphasized: What is culture? What is intercultural competence? And is there any difference between intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence?

2.1. Culture

Culture is an enriching concept with the closer and closer communication among the world. When the culture is not confined in the boundaries of a country, it is related to many aspects of life. Scholars have defined the culture from different aspects. Some scholars defines culture at the macro level. According to Liddicoat, he defines the culture as a complex system [3], and Byram uses an iceberg metaphor to describe the culture. Under the surface of the culture of daily life, there is much more invisible culture which ingrained into our consciousness, such as the values and the relationship between people and so on [4]. Bennett divides culture into two categories: subjective culture and objective culture. The object culture refers to the visible, abstract and the theoretical aspects of culture like social, cultural and historical institutions as well as aspects of geography, politics and arts. The subjective culture refers to the comparatively tangible and practical aspects of culture like greetings, eating habits, rituals and “everyday situations” [5].

2.2. Intercultural competence

Intercultural competence is a complex concept, which has been used including global competence, global citizenship, cross-cultural competence, international competence, intercultural effectiveness, and intercultural sensitivity, to name a few [6].

Firstly, as to the differences between intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence, there are two main views. One of the view considers the intercultural competence the same as intercultural communicative competence, like Yang Ying and Zhuang Enping, who think intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence are equivalent concepts. They believe that the equivalence between intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence is helpful to liberate our ideas from the narrow vision of language communication, which can promote us to concentrate on the importance of intercultural awareness, thinking ability, nonverbal communication and communication strategies in the process of cultivating intercultural communicative competence [7]. The other view holds that the intercultural competence belong to the intercultural communicative competence. Byram believes that intercultural communicative competence includes intercultural competence, which is made up by intercultural competence and communicative competence [8].

Secondly, according to the definition of intercultural competence, many scholars have defined the term of it. Although none of the definitions has been generally accepted, the definitions and theoretical generalizations made by scholars admit that

intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate properly with people from different cultural backgrounds. Deardorff stresses that cross-culturally competent people are those who can interact effectively and appropriately with people who have multilevel cultural identities [9].

Then, aiming at the components of intercultural competence, many scholars have their own views. Byram defines the intercultural competence includes four aspects which are skills of interpreting and discovery, knowledge, attitudes and critical cultural awareness. Lustig and Koester think intercultural competence requires sufficient knowledge, appropriate motivation as well as trained action. That is to say, to cultivate students' intercultural competence, it is vital to transfer the students' knowledge to behavior [10]. Yang Ying and Zhuang Enping believes that intercultural communicative competence consists of global consciousness system, cultural adaptation ability system, knowledge ability system and communicative practice ability. Spitzberg and Cupach puts forward the theory of three elements of intercultural communicative competence, which refers to motivation, knowledge and skills [11].

2.3. Models of intercultural communicative competence

In foreign countries, Samovar and Porter classifies intercultural communicative competence into three aspects: motivation, knowledge and skill, which are widely adopted and quoted by scholars at home and abroad.

Bennett proposes a culture-general model for the acquisition of intercultural sensitivity, the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which provides a basis for understanding the development of intercultural competence [12]. The model is made up two broad stages: ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism. Ethnocentrism includes three stages which are denial, defense, and minimization. And the other three stages includes in the ethnorelativism are acceptance, adaptation and integration. The model can reflect the students' ongoing attitude to the different culture. And Bennett in 1999 have sought to link their model of intercultural competence to language development. However, there is a problem in this model is that how we can evaluate the students at which stage. And what should we do if students' language ability is unequal to the stage level. Liddicoat has argued for a non-linear process of acquisition of intercultural competence. That is teachers give students input first, and students notice the differences and then they reflect them and give the output and cycle around [13].

In China, based our domestic educational environment and situation, our Chinese scholars propose the models which adapt to students' intercultural competence development. Zhao Aiguo and Jiang Yaming construct intercultural communicative competence model, including language ability, pragmatic ability and behavior ability. Yang Ying and Zhuang Enping build intercultural communicative competence model made up by global mentality, knowledge, cultural adaptation and communication management. And each element compromises elements which are related with language teaching. Global mentality is made up by intercultural awareness and thinking. Knowledge refers to communication culture knowledge, including values history and so on. Cultural adaptation includes the ability of psychological adjustment and flexibility. Communication management covers linguistic communicative competence, non-verbal communicative competence and communicative strategies. It emphasizes the comprehensive and flexible use of linguistic, non-verbal,

communicative culture and other knowledge. Its purpose is to complete communicative tasks and solve practical problems in piratical work.

Zhang Hongling puts forward the model of “Four three two and one”. That is four perspective, three dimensions, two contexts and one platform. And the Integrated Model for Chinese Students Intercultural Competence Development has been proved effectively [14]. Comparing the views of foreign and domestic scholars, foreign scholars pay much attention to the communication among different countries and their purpose is for political needs. Then domestic scholars concentrate on how to broaden the students’ horizon by improving students’ intercultural competence, whose purpose is to cultivate global citizens.

3. Intercultural Competence in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Based on the research, cultivating intercultural competence is a complex period and it cannot be achieved just in the teaching in classroom. The cultivation of intercultural communicative competence should run through the whole process of foreign language teaching and it cannot be cultivated only by teaching the curriculum of intercultural competence or introducing cultural knowledge into language skills, but should be reflected in the learning and teaching of each language skills class. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) raised by European Union provides a new view for our foreign language teaching and learning. Based on the CLIL, Coyle comes up with 4C principles, which are content, communication, cognition and culture. They construct the classroom context together [15]. Sheng Yulan states that this kind of teaching approach can give three implications to us, for example, we can promote decentralization of language learning and create a social cognitive micro-context in classroom. Combining the content and language is a practical way to teach language, because students can learn from using [16]. Zhang Honglin’s view is a little similar to the CLIL. They both state that foreign language teaching is not the only way to cultivate intercultural communicative competence. According to Zhang Honglin’s view, history, geography, literature and other subjects can also introduce culture knowledge to students from different perspectives. Zhang believed that intercultural language learning is the process that institution helps learners build worldviews and values, raise intercultural awareness and competence, construct identity through a set of educational procedures. And she also illustrated that there were two ways to improve intercultural language learning and teaching in our country. One is top-down method that teacher could bring intercultural teaching elements into curriculum design, thinking about objectives and principles to develop intercultural competence. The other is bottom-up way that is teachers make changes from themselves. It is necessary for teachers to realize that the ultimate goal of language learning is not language itself. Language supports a passageway for learners to know cultures and change behaviors. In fact, foreign language teaching alone is not enough for the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence. It not only needs the support of society and school environment, but also needs the close cooperation of other disciplines.

For specific approaches to cultivating students’ intercultural competence, Hu Wenzhong states that we can cultivate students’ intercultural competence from three aspects: cognitive, emotion and ability. Firstly, at the cognitive level, lectures, audio-visual products and online education can be adopted as teaching methods. Then from the perspective of emotion, training can be taken in a variety of ways including typical case analysis, interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds, field

experience, etc [17]. Lastly, as to the ability, language competence is specific and can be scientifically tested. So, the ability to communication can be trained in intensive lectures and real life experience, which have a significant effect on the cultivation of students' interpersonal skills, flexibility in different cultural environments.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of intercultural language teaching is to cultivate students' intercultural competence, and the process should be integrated into teaching. The combination of the cultivation of students' intercultural competence and teaching lies in the understanding of Chinese and foreign cultures. Since the intercultural competence is so vital in the foreign language teaching that more flexible approaches should be explored to cultivate students' intercultural competence and apply them into the real classes.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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