

# Study of strategies to enhance students' intercultural communication awareness and competence

Jiujun Ren

School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Jiaotong University, Dalian, Liaoning, China

**Abstract:** In an era of globalization where international cooperation becomes a must in most fields, talents with international vision and intercultural communication skills are in great need. In response to the demand of this market, colleges must pay attention to their cultivation of students' intercultural communication awareness and competence. This paper explores possible strategies that can be applied in college English teaching and learning to meet this need.

## 1. Introduction

Under the background of economic globalization, international communication is increasingly frequent, therefore a large number of international talents with strong cross-cultural communication ability are urgently needed. In recent years, cross-cultural communication training has become one of the hot spots in the field of foreign language education. According to Guide to College English Teaching, the goal of college English education is to cultivate students' practical ability in using English, enhance their intercultural communication awareness and competence, develop their independent learning ability and improve their comprehensive literacy, so that they can use English in their study, life, social communication and future work effectively, and meet the needs of national, social, scholastic and individual development. [1] This curriculum objective proposed by the steering committee of foreign language teaching in colleges and universities explicitly points out the importance of enhancing students' intercultural communication awareness and competence, and should draw the attention of all college English teachers.

## 2. Theory of inter-cultural communication

### 2.1. Introduction

Intercultural communication is a discipline that studies communication across different cultures and social groups, or how culture affects communication. It describes the wide range of communication processes and problems that naturally appear within an organization or social context made up of individuals from different religious, social, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. In this sense, it seeks to understand how people from different countries and

cultures act, communicate, and perceive the world around them. [2] Intercultural communication focuses on the recognition and respect of those with cultural differences. The goal is mutual adaptation between two or more distinct cultures which leads to biculturalism/multiculturalism rather than complete assimilation. It promotes the development of cultural sensitivity and allows for empathic understanding across different cultures. [2]

### 2.2. Intercultural communication competence

According to Michael Byram, intercultural communication competences include: knowledge, attitude, skills and awareness. [3] Knowledge refers to culture-specific insights, values and practices, information about the people, their rules for communication applied within their culture, the context, and the expectations people from the other culture have for interactions. Attitude refers to the openness, acceptance and readiness to adapt to other cultures that may be totally different from that of ours and calls for efforts to relate to, being capable of letting go of any anxieties or negative emotions one may have towards people from other cultures. Skills include the ability to search for culture-related information, make analysis of the information and understand it, the ability to relate to or interpret varying cultures, the ability to discover and interact with varying cultures, and the language proficiency needed to do so. Awareness refers to the ability to make introspective comparison of one's own native culture to that of others and make decisions critically.

## 3. Strategies to enhance students' intercultural communication awareness and competence

### 3.1. Guidelines

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renjiuju@126.com

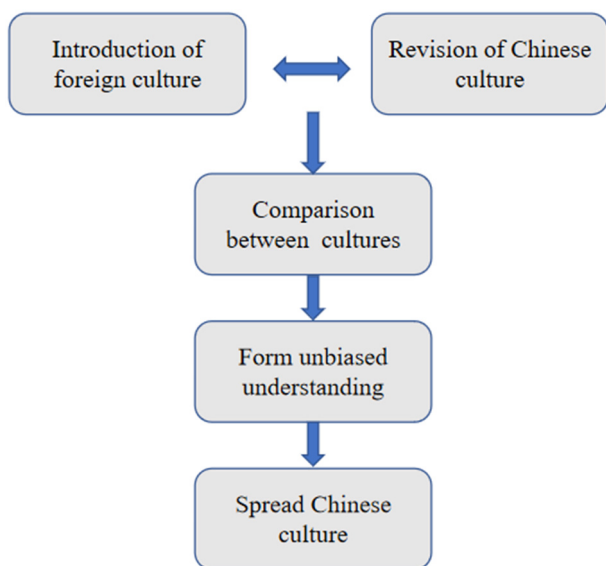
UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education suggest that intercultural education should be based on learners' existing experience and knowledge system, and respect learners' cultural identity. The content of education should include subjects such as the history, geography, literature, art, aesthetics, science and technology of the learner's home country and the target language country, as well as the values, lifestyles and national cultures of the home country and the target language country (UNESCO, 2006:33-38)<sup>[4]</sup>.

The intercultural education in college English should cover the literacy education of the geographical situation, major historical events, literary classics, major artistic schools, famous music, architectural achievements and other essential aspects of the home country and major English-speaking countries. More importantly, college English teaching should help students learn to express the uniqueness of Chinese culture in a way acceptable to Westerners, spread the excellent Chinese culture to the world, find and discover the common ground between Chinese and English culture, and help students overcome communicative psychological barriers, ethnocentrism, cultural stereotypes and prejudices.

The intercultural education in college English also calls for the increase of cultural awareness which allows students to see beyond one's external behaviors and actions in order to understand how one's beliefs, values, and traditions shape the way they communicate. This is of great significance for the sake of fostering harmonious existence between people from different cultures.

To enhance students' cultural awareness, it is important that students are willing to celebrate individual differences between people from different cultures, like honoring their customs or taboos. Cross-cultural communication will only work if everyone understands each other's backgrounds and customs.

Therefore, in order to enhance students' intercultural communication competence and awareness, college English teaching may follow this procedure:



### 3.2. Introduction of culture-related knowledge

To guarantee accurate use of English and appreciation of western way of thinking, college English teaching use materials that are written by native English speakers. In such texts, culture-loaded words and expressions are highly likely to occur and cause confusions or misunderstandings. Therefore, teachers are responsible to give extra and detailed explanation on expressions such as X generation, Odyssey years, financial literacy, and on differences between Chinese and western cultures such as differences of private and public school education in Britain, America and China or the image of gods and goddesses in Greek mythologies and Chinese legends so that students can gain some insights into cultures around the world.

The introduction of culture-related knowledge can be carried out in different forms and at different time to suit different needs of students. Articles and papers can be provided for visual learners, videos and movie clips for audio learners, interview and discussion activities for hands-on learners. Pre-class, in-class and after-class activities could be offered to students so that they can learn at their conveniences. And to check whether students gained an overall picture of target culture being introduced to them, objective as well as subjective test questions can be used to evaluate students' understanding.

### 3.3. Deepening the understanding of Chinese culture

The influential cross-culture researcher Edward T Hall once pointed out in his book *The Silent Language*: "Culture hides more than it reveals and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants. Years of study have convinced me that the real job is not to understand foreign culture but to understand our own. I am also convinced that all that one ever gets from studying foreign culture is to learn more about how one's own system works."<sup>[5]</sup>

According to Edward T Hall's understanding of culture iceberg, in order to relate to and understand another culture, one needs to dig deep into one's own culture to find its biases and bents. Therefore, after explaining background information about foreign cultures to students, teachers should review with students the counterparts in Chinese culture and help students understand our own culture from different perspectives. A lot of the traditions that people insist on and stick to passing down from one generation to the next has a lot to do with their history. So, to help students learn how and why people do certain things and behave a certain way, the best way is to educate them about the history of their culture.

From the perspective of improving students' cultural literacy, traditional Chinese culture can be said to be the best quality education. It is impossible for teachers to instill students with too much cultural knowledge due to limitation of teaching periods. However, revision of traditional culture can help students sort out information conducive to enlightenment or understanding in the vast reservoir of excellent traditional Chinese culture and help students transform disorder into order, thus form their

unique "knowledge tree" within their logical system. Only in this way can teachers help students lay a solid foundation for forming unbiased opinions on foreign cultures.

### **3.4. Comparison between Chinese and western culture and seeking for common ground**

After students have had a picture of cultural knowledge of other countries and gained a thorough understanding of the corresponding Chinese culture, comparison between the two cultures can be made. For one thing, teachers should help students identify and analyze the reasons for differences so that students have a better understanding of other cultures. For another, teachers and students should work together to seek for basic principles that are common to both cultures so that we can find a common ground to start with in intercultural communication.

The differences between Chinese and other cultures lie in several dimensions: collectivist culture where unity and selflessness are highly valued vs individualist culture where independence and personal identity are actively promoted, long-term oriented culture where values are placed on the future vs short-term orientated culture where values are placed on the past and present, masculinity culture where gender roles are fixed vs femininity culture where gender roles are more fluid, indulgence culture where free gratification of basic and natural human desires are allowed vs restraint culture where gratification is controlled and regulated by social norms, high power distance culture where inequality is seen as the basis of societal order vs low power distance culture where inequality is seen as sometimes necessary, but the more that relationships can be equalized, the better for everyone, high uncertainty avoidance culture where tolerance of unpredictable and unstructured situations is high vs low uncertainty avoidance culture where tolerance of unpredictable and unstructured situations is low. Teachers should spare no efforts in raising students' awareness of cultural differences from these perspectives which may facilitate in-depth comprehension of foreign cultures.

### **3.5. Overcoming stereotyped and prejudiced opinions towards other cultures**

A stereotype refers to a fixed general image or set of characteristics believed by many people as representing a particular type of people or things. Prejudice is formed when negative stereotypes are kept in mind for an extended period, which subsequently misleads people to make inaccurate evaluations regarding other groups. Stereotyped and prejudiced opinions are detrimental in intercultural communication, they may cause misunderstanding, dispute and even conflicts. It's essential that teachers and students work together to dig deeper and gain profound understanding of foreign cultures in comparison to Chinese culture so that students can form unbiased view on other cultures.

The first step towards forming unbiased opinions on foreign cultures is to become fully aware that people sometimes tend to unconsciously view the world from

their own perspectives, taking the in-group as archetypal and rating all other groups with reference to this ideal. This tendency to glorify one's own group and defame and discriminate other groups is the biggest barrier in intercultural communication. Only when students come to know this tendency and constantly reflect on it, can they get on the way to fair communication with other cultures.

Assigning a wide range of generalized attributes to an individual based on his or her membership in a particular culture or social group is pretty dangerous. So, the second step towards forming unbiased opinions on foreign cultures is to avoid assumptions or judgement. We should not assume that others will act the same way as we do, use language and symbols the same way as we do, or even behave on the basis of the same values and beliefs. In the meanwhile, we should not come to the conclusion that they are in error or that their way is invalid or inferior when people from other cultures act differently.

If we want to show respect for other people and communicate effectively in intercultural communication, we need to adopt a more positive viewpoint, in the form of cultural pluralism- the practice of accepting multiple cultures on their own terms. When crossing cultural boundaries, we should move beyond simple acceptance and adapt our communication style to that of the foreign cultures we encounter, or even integrating aspects of those cultures into our own.

### **3.6. Spreading Chinese culture to the world**

College English has been used to teaching British and American cultures for a long time, and the cultivation of students' cross-cultural awareness also focuses on how to make students understand British and American culture. With the continuous expansion of our country's influence in the world, and out of the need of spreading Chinese culture abroad, it is important to cultivate students' two-way cross-cultural awareness. Chinese culture should be added to cross-cultural consciousness cultivation in order to enhance students' ability to spread our national culture to foreign countries and improve students' awareness of their cultural equality.<sup>[6]</sup>

Cultivating students who are capable of spreading Chinese culture to the world can benefit our country a lot. For one thing, it can enhance and expand our country's soft power. The aim of cultural exchange is to pursue cultural identity of human soul and emotion. Countries all over the world attach great importance to cultural exchange which plays an important role in displaying their own culture. For another, spreading Chinese culture to the world can consolidate the international status of China's cultural value system in this new era. The core socialist values could be integrated into the subject of communication and embodied in the object of communication. Through people and objects carrying the excellent Chinese culture, the affinity of Chinese culture can be demonstrated to the maximum extent, so as to win the understanding and recognition of the international community.

The key to telling the "China story" well is to explain China's path and experience which contains some kind of directional and cultural wisdom and guidance. Emphasis

should not be given only to the Chinese characteristics and Chinese elements, stress should also be laid on sublimating the universal principles through summary and generalization, highlighting the cultural connotation and universal value of the Chinese path and Chinese experience in solving major problems facing human society in the process of development. Systematically explaining these cultural connotations and enlightenments clearly is itself a major contribution to human civilization. These stories not only let the world know about China, but also made China known to the world. To tell the "China story" well, it is very important to transform China's advantages in development into advantages in discourse. In order to achieve such transformation, we are required to refine and summarize Chinese path, experience and problems objectively, and elevate them into theories with regularity. In this way, we can propose Chinese solutions to the common problems faced by mankind and highlight the global significance of China's theories and experience.

In fact, in the process of globalization, countries are paying more and more attention to China's voice in the discussion of many world issues, to China's suggestions in the process of solving the common problems of mankind, and to China's solutions in the process of solving the difficult problems of global development. To this end, "It is very important to explain the Chinese model well, both for the West and for developing countries, which are looking for a new non-Western model. A clear explanation of China's path and experience, and winning recognition and respect from the world, will naturally transform China's development advantages into discourse advantages.

#### 4. Conclusion

On one hand, the cultivation of intercultural communication awareness and competence shows the humanistic nature of college English teaching. Learning College English enables students to achieve positive interaction between Chinese culture and English-speaking countries' cultures, deepen their understanding of both, cultivate cross-cultural attitudes and awareness, improve their cultural literacy, and help them develop an open attitude in cultural exchange. On the other hand, the cultivation of intercultural communication awareness and competence shows the instrumental nature of college English teaching. By learning college English, students can master the target language skills, and effectively improve their cross-cultural communication and academic communication ability in their major field. Due to the benefits mentioned above, exploration of useful strategies to enhance students' intercultural communication competence is of great significance.

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