

College English Teachers' Perspectives on Intercultural Communicative Competence Cultivation

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Abstract. College English is a required curriculum for all college students in China so that the ICC as one of the core contents and primary objectives has been a concern for EFL educators and researchers. There is a need to study the teachers of College English curricula since the lack of related researches fails to provide enough convincing findings to reveal the teachers' understanding, attitudes and experiences in IC cultivation. The College English teachers' perspectives on ICC can affect the effectiveness of ICC teachers so that the research focuses on probing the teachers' attitudes, beliefs, experiences and challenges by interviewing twelve EGP teaching from the five colleges in northeastern China. The findings are that although the teachers hold positive attitudes to ICC teaching , their teaching beliefs and teaching practices are not always consistent due to the lack of the theoretical guideline, first hand intercultural experiences and supportive training. There are some suggestions on how to aid EGP teachers to improve their ICC teaching.

1 Introduction

College English, as a required course in Chinese universities has been through several adjustments and become a comprehensive English curriculum covering language skills practices, intercultural cultivation and context-based pragmatics, etc, To meet the increasing needs of social and economic international exchanges, English education will exert more influence in widening college students' global horizon, empowering them to communicate internationally and enabling them to build up career both at home and abroad. Therefore, the Guidelines on College English Teaching issued by Ministry of Education in 2017 and in 2020 orient the nature of the curricula as humanity more than a tool of communication. That means the priority objective of the English education is to improve students humanistic quality, one of which is clearly clarified as intercultural communicative competence. Since College English curricula have been classified into three types of courses: English Courses for General Purposes, English Courses for Specific Purposes and Intercultural Communication Courses. Most universities offer their students all three-type curricula. Although Intercultural Communication English is an independent course, mostly a selective course in most universities, the Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has still been considered as an important objective of the other two courses as well. Hence , ICC which has become a concern among English educators and scholars has generated a large number of researches on its definition and interpretation, significance and practical necessity, component models and analytical frameworks, teaching methods and effectiveness, and assessment and so on.

[1][4][5]. in recent years, ICC teaching is a hot issue in the related studies. Many researchers have proved that classroom teaching of ICC is effective to improve learners' ICC.[2][3][6] Teachers play the key role in EFL classroom teaching so that teachers' perspectives, attitudes, experiences in ICC teaching can reveal and reflect the teaching effectiveness and teaching reality. However , there are limited researches which focus on the teachers' perspectives on ICC teaching. It is necessary to explore further the teachers' understanding, attitudes , experiences and actions to enlighten the effective ICC cultivation.

2 ICC Teaching in the context of College English Curricula

In accordance with the Guideline of College English Teaching , the shift has been achieved from focusing on the language knowledge and skill drilling to employing more interactive activities to promote students' communicative competence. Although the intercultural communication courses are in the list of College English Curricula, they are mostly offered as selective ones in the College English programs. The most popular College English Course is still the EGP course. Considering its coverage and large scale, to observe the effectiveness and teaching status quo of ICC, it is more reasonable to analyze the EGP classroom teaching.

English Courses for General Purposes (EGP courses) are to improve students' language proficiency , traditionally preparing students for English reading, writing, speaking and listening, but now the intercultural communication teaching is going through the whole

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teaching process. The main stream textbooks of EGP courses published in China all select the materials which can present the intercultural knowledge, intercultural contrast and comparison, and even some of them design the unit questions, tasks and projects aiming at the intercultural reflections for students. To confirm whether ICC has been considered as the necessary teaching objective, the course syllabuses from ten universities in the northeastern China have been selected to study. ICC is the one of core teaching objectives embodied in the syllabuses. Moreover, it is a tendency for college English teaching that teachers should organize more efficient classrooms to help students raise intercultural awareness rather than drill their language skills due to the limited class hours and the aid of mobile learning and diverse online courses as well as learning platforms.

3 Methodology

3.1 The research questions

The research is to investigate and portray the teachers' understanding, attitudes and experiences in ICC teaching. The research questions is as follows:

- Are the EGP courses teachers ready for ICC teaching?
- What are the the teachers' attitudes to ICC teaching?
- In the classroom teaching, how do they think of their ICC teaching? What do they value and how do they teach?

3.2 The participants and setting

The responsive interview method is utilized in this research in order to attain the authentic materials which reflect the teachers' thoughts and inner mind. According to the Convenience Sampling and Maximum variation sampling principles, the twelve EGP teachers are selected from the five colleges which have similar background and level in a northeastern province. Among these teachers, six of them are lecturers, three males and three females. Four of them are associate professors, one male and three females. Two of them are female professors. One of the twelve has doctoral degrees and the others have master degrees. To enhance reliability and validity, Seidman's three-round interview is employed to fully gain the real responses of the participants. Each round interview lasts 60 minutes and all interviews of each participate finish in two weeks. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by ifly voice software. The coding and analysis were examined by the other team members.

4 Findings

Through the coding and analysis, there are some findings in EGP teachers' attitudes, understanding, puzzles as well as some problems of ICC for the EGP teachers.

4.1 The teachers' attitudes to ICC teaching

It is important to know whether the teachers have a positive attitude towards the ICC teaching so that during the interviews, each participate was asked to talk about their views on the ICC teaching, including what they thought of ICC, whether they thought ICC was necessary for the students and whether they taught something related with intercultural communication. Ten of the twelve teachers mentioned in some way the ICC teaching was more important than the teaching basic language knowledge and language skill drills in College English. When the students stepped into the universities, they aimed at the improvement of practical skills for their future living and career. Due to the limited teaching hours, to train students to reach a good proficiency was not realized easily. However it is more realistic and efficient for teachers to draw the students' awareness of intercultural communication, enlighten the reflective thoughts of intercultural differences and help them in the communicative skills. Two of them thought the limited class hours forced them to choose the language skills as teaching content rather than ICC. In their understanding, ICC was a language skill at higher level which should be based on the solid foundation of language knowledge and proficiency. If the language proficiency was not enough to support the students to communicate with foreigners, ICC didn't make sense for English learners because there wasn't going to be communication in depth. But in their interviews, they mentioned they had taught some intercultural knowledge and communicative skills in their classes more or less, mainly to arouse the students' interests and liven up the classroom atmosphere. Therefore, it is revealed that in general the teachers hold positive attitudes to the ICC teaching.

4.2 The teachers' understanding of the teaching objectives of ICC

All the participates were asked to talk about their understanding of ICC teaching, including the questions:

- What is ICC teaching in your mind?
- What should be taught in ICC teaching?
- What are the objectives of ICC teaching?
- Why do you think the students should improve their ICC?
- In what way can students enhance their ICC?

In the interview coding of the ten who hold clearly positive attitudes, having a global horizon has a maximum number of occurrences and repeatedly appear in each interview. Proper communicative skills and strategies also appear in the each interview when the interviewees were asked about the objectives and contents of ICC teaching. However, these concepts still remain blur for the teachers when they were asked to explain these objectives in detail.

"I think strategies are kind of ability of observing the differences between the two cultures. er, that is critical thinking, and intercultural awareness. ...intercultural awareness is that you should know people behave differently in different cultures, ...you can compare and

contrast...you should know some social norms and traditions and try to follow, understand.”

“global horizon is to have interest in the things outside China and know the differences among different nations. ...have a open mind to the world...(when the participate was asked how the students improve the horizon) er, ...they should achieve language proficiency and be open to the intercultural communication,...read more English and listen to the English radio...”

Only two teachers gave a detail description of their class design for ICC which were based on the materials in textbook and conformed to the teaching objectives of the unit in the textbooks.

Moreover, the teachers value highly on the mother culture and self-reflections. They thought ICC teaching should balance the mother culture and other culture through the contrast and comparison, reflection and deepening interpretation of mother culture. Hence, the reflective thinking on the mother culture and the interpreting Chinese culture in English are partly objectives of ICC teaching.

4.3 Contradiction between the belief and actions

Although most teachers thought they embraced ICC in their teaching and they helped students improve their intercultural communicative strategies, there are some inconsistency between their belief and actions.

In their stories about how they taught intercultural communicative strategies, their descriptions are as follows:

“I chose some pictures of different festival traditions to show in the class. Let students discuss what festival they were and how people celebrated them...students can search information on web and report in English...after the activities I gave students some reading materials and introduced more useful information such as the history, the cultural phenomena behind these celebrations,...in this way, students can improve their intercultural awareness...seeing films, reading related books can help students improve their intercultural awareness. These strategies are useful.”

“The strategies are needy when they encounter the unfamiliar things in other cultural contexts....We should teach them to be open with knowing the differences and holding positive attitudes. ...In the class, when the materials in the textbook present some cultural differences, I will enlarge on the explanations and try to introduce more similar phenomena to draw the students' attentions to the differences.”

The teachers thought they helped students acquire the ICC strategies, but actually they were teaching the fact knowledge. The fact knowledge does improve students' awareness to the intercultural differences but it is weak in changing students behaviors. When they are asked about the the components of ICC, they stressed more on the awareness, language proficiency and they thought their teaching aimed at these elements but actually their description of the teaching process is lack of correlations between the target goals and teaching applications.

4.4 Challenges of ICC faced by the teachers

Since ICC has been put into the national guideline of College English teaching, EGP teachers increasingly accept it as one of the important teaching objectives, but there are still many challenges which the teachers have to face in their classroom practices.

4.4.1 Lack of the theoretical guide

According to the the teachers' statements, they designed and implemented teaching contents and the class activities, mostly based on their own experiences, interests, tasks and requirements of the textbooks. Half of the teachers admitted that they seldom turned to the academic researches to aid their teaching. In the interviews, only three teachers could elaborate the ICC related theories clearly and explain how they applied these theories to their classroom teaching. The other three of the teachers mentioned they read about the ICC academic literature but only to gain basic information or write some teaching documents required by their schools. When asked whether their teaching can achieve the target goals, they hold a cautious response that they didn't get the valid assessment to reach the judgement.

4.4.2 Lack of the first-hand intercultural experiences

In the interviews, four of the teachers who have the experiences of living abroad or studying abroad mentioned these experiences did help them to give a kind of outsider's perspectives on the cultural differences and unique understanding of the intercultural awareness. These authentic stories and experiences helped them arouse students' attention and interests and they were more willing to share their understandings and strategies of intercultural communication. However, with the time passing by, some of the experiences were fading away, and they thought the old stories brought less freshness to themselves as well as their students.

The three of them mentioned their puzzles about how to deal with some intercultural conflicts and how to behave properly in the intercultural context. Sometimes they referred to some books, blogs and podcasts to find out the solutions and guide but these information gained in this way couldn't answer all of the questions. When the students asked some questions, they gave some suggestions and then remained doubtful to their responses which they thought could be a good way to deal with intercultural issues. They mentioned they hardly had intercultural interaction in current jobs, which they thought was the biggest problem for them to teach ICC effectively.

4.4.3 Lack of the supportive training

In the interviews, only one teacher had specialized training in ICC teaching. The training program was organized as teachers workshop offered by the language academic press in which participants share their teaching

experiences and intercultural communication cases. The rest of the teachers didn't attend the training related with ICC research and teaching. When they were asked about whether they needed ICC training and what kind of training they intended. In their responses, there is a strong desire for supportive training especially in case-based teaching, ICC immersive programme and ICC teachers workshops. They were searching for the interactions among ICC teachers and exchange of teaching experiences. The inter-culturally authentic experiences are the top priority so that an interactive workshop in intercultural context is welcomed and hoped by the teachers. However, the immersive training mentioned above is rarely achieved because of the lack of international faculties and students in the colleges. Meanwhile, it is difficult for the teachers to gain the intercultural interactions and IC experiences on their own so that they depend on the schools to get the training resources.

5 Conclusion

Although the EGP teachers embrace the ICC as the teaching objective, it is underestimated that they are facing many challenges and there is a great amount of space to help them improve.

ICC teaching is not just based on the individual interests and experiences but on the systematic teaching plan and ICC theories. Due to the limited class hours, it should be more efficient for teachers to organize the ICC teaching since the class objectives cover the language proficiency as well.

Therefore, the training program should be designed to support teachers especially to offer their first hand intercultural communicative experiences and theoretical training. Actually ICC should be involved with practices in the real contexts otherwise the ICC teaching can not achieve the substantive results.

ICC is still a blur teaching objective for College English education. In the classroom, teachers should provide opportunities for language immersion and exchange to help students develop their language skills and cultural understanding.[7][8] This can be achieved through language exchange programs, cultural immersion trips, or language-specific activities. Teachers can incorporate cultural examples and simulations into their teaching to help students apply their knowledge to real-life situations. This can be achieved through role-playing games, simulations, or case studies. Teachers should provide feedback and support for students' development in intercultural communication skills. Feedback should be constructive and aimed at helping students identify areas for improvement. Support can include resources, mentoring, or one-on-one meetings to discuss student progress.

In short, intercultural communication teaching can be challenging, but it is also very rewarding. It is highly demanded for College English teachers so that college English teachers need resources and supportive organizational environment from their schools.

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