

An Empirical Study on College English Curriculum Assessment and Cultivation of Intercultural Communication Competence

Qian Wang

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Northwestern Polytechnical University, China

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Abstract Developing intercultural competence has been increasingly vital in the current college English curriculum reform. Based on data collected in curriculum assessment of English courses for non-language majors together with surveys and interviews, this study, explored critical factors in English curriculum that influence students' intercultural competence with the purpose of promoting effective teaching of intercultural competence and providing empirical evidence for the college English curriculum reform. Results suggested that class engagement, autonomous learning, and teaching methods had significant impacts on the overall level of intercultural competence and its specific dimensions, while the impacts of English language skills and satisfaction rate on intercultural competence were not statistically significant. Besides, students with different backgrounds and campus environments were significantly different in intercultural competence. The findings of this study on the relationships between curriculum factors and intercultural competence shed light on systematic development of intercultural competence in foreign language teaching and improvement of intercultural teaching.

Keywords Intercultural Competence, Curriculum Assessment, EFL Teaching

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) refers to the competence to communicate in intercultural circumstances, i.e., “the competence to successfully accomplish communication process when people from different cultural backgrounds are able to show strong intercultural awareness, identify cultural differences and eliminate cultural interferences at intercultural encounters [1]. In the times with ever expanding globalization and

cultural diversity and inclusion, enhancing students' intercultural communication competence, for sure, has become a priority in cultivating innovative talents in colleges and universities. In particular, cultivating ICC has been listed as core content in the new “Guidebook for College English Teaching” published in 2016, which indicates college English curriculum and foreign language teaching have gradually become an important platform and channel for colleges and universities to accomplish that mission. However, the cultivation of intercultural communication competence in China's foreign language teaching is still in its infancy due to its educational approach and teaching not in a systematic manner but on a fragmented and segmentary basis [2] [3]. The main reason is that the lack of uniformity in the core elements of intercultural competence training and the curriculum of the current foreign language teaching makes it impossible to integrate intercultural teaching ideas into all aspects of foreign language teaching systematically and scientifically and thus affects the effect of intercultural competence training.

As a new research field, the study of intercultural communication competence in foreign language teaching has been increasingly on a rise over the past years. Some existing studies abroad have demonstrated the effectiveness of cultivating students' intercultural communication competence via foreign language teaching [4] [5] [6] [7], and the objectives, principles and implications of intercultural communication competence training in foreign language teaching have been discussed about and addressed among the Chinese scholars in foreign language teaching field [8] as well. However, discussions emerging from the contents, modes and methods of intercultural teaching in foreign language courses are relatively rare, even rarer for empirical studies [9]. So in general, despite plentiful intercultural studies and discussions about the factors affecting the cultivation of college students' intercultural competence on the

conceptual level, intercultural studies in foreign language teaching are not adequately researched, especially weak in terms of empirical studies. At present, studies on integrating the intercultural competence training into foreign language teaching and English curriculum assessment are not widely implemented. The relevant factors affecting the intercultural communication competence training in English courses exploring from the perspective of foreign language teaching curriculum are not yet clear and cannot be found in the existing literatures. In that regard, this paper intended to explore the practical way in the curriculum to cultivate intercultural competence in foreign language teaching with focus on ICC itself, and measuring the level of students' ICC. By combining English curriculum assessment and intercultural teaching, this paper analyzed and discussed the major factors in skill-based English courses which influence intercultural communication competence, thus providing a theoretical and empirical basis for the adjustment of the curriculum system and the teaching reform.

2. Overview

This paper is divided into three parts: 1) a thorough exploration into the overall level of students' intercultural competence; 2) analysis and assessment of skill factors in English curriculum (curriculum arrangement, teaching methods, students' background, English learning engagement, etc.) which have significant influence on the overall level of students' intercultural communication competence; 3) analysis of the influence of the curriculum factors related to the overall level of intercultural competence on the individual variable of intercultural competence. Specifically, the intercultural theory adopted is Byram's (1997) EU model, including four core elements in cultivation of intercultural communication competence: intercultural knowledge, skill, attitude and critical intercultural awareness.

3. Methodology

This paper adopted Tashakkori and Teddlie's (2010) research approach by combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. The qualitative approach was mainly used to assist in the analysis and interpretation of questionnaire data in order to get a full picture of the self-rating of intercultural communication competence, thereby enhancing the accuracy and credibility of the results. The sample included students of Grade 2015 of non-language majors from Northwestern Polytechnical University. As a pilot study, this study invited 38 Chinese students (aged from 19-21) who study English as the second language as the participants.

3.1. Questionnaire Survey

Questionnaire survey, in this study, combined two sets of questionnaires: scale for self-rating of intercultural communication competence and scale for assessment of English curriculum, designed respectively to examine the level of students' self-rating of intercultural communication competence, and the students' learning engagement and outcomes with respect to college English courses. We adopted the scale for self-rating of intercultural competence of Chinese college students designed by Fan Weiwei *et al* (2013) to obtain data for students' self-rating of ICC. Based on Byram's ICC (Intercultural Communicative Competence) Model, the scale was adjusted according to the actual situation of Chinese college students, and proved to be favorably reliable and valid in empirical studies [9]. The scale included four variables: intercultural knowledge, attitude, skill and awareness, and 40 description items. Using Likert Scale rating of "0" to "5" points which means "none", "poor", "relatively poor", "average", "good" and "excellent" respectively.

The questionnaire for assessment of English courses was used in combination with the scale for self-rating of intercultural competence. Based on the framework of NSSE criteria to measure educational performance, with reference to the American NSSE and Chinese localized questionnaires, the questionnaire design was modified as being appropriate for comprehensive assessment of the learning engagement of non-language students into English courses and their learning outcomes. The scale assesses the performance of English courses from four variables: course related learning engagement (students' in-class learning engagement and after-class independent learning engagement), assessment of the validity of teaching methods, English learning environment (including students' participation in English related social and campus activities) and assessment of learning outcomes (English skills enhanced and students' satisfaction rate). The questionnaire covered the students' personal background information, including student ID, gender, and family and educational background. The scale also used the Likert Scale 0 to 5 rating method. In the questionnaire pilot study, the scale had Cronbach's alpha efficient of 0.881 with ideal sub-scale credibility above 0.8, indicating that the measured data of the questionnaire were favorably consistent and stable and thus highly reliable.

3.2. Interview

The supporting qualitative approach adopted semi-structured interviews around the components of intercultural communication competence, focusing on the in-class experiences and extracurricular intercultural communication activities of students during the study of English courses. The interview strategy laid stress on the

description and reflection of the learning experiences. The interviewees were 4 students selected from the questionnaire sample with different backgrounds of intercultural communication (experience of going abroad), levels of English language proficiency and classroom performances. Interview time took 40 minutes on average. The accuracy of interview records were reviewed and verified with the interviewees to ensure they were not misunderstood.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

In the present study, e-questionnaires were issued to 38 students of computer science majors of Northwestern Polytechnical University upon two semesters from the time when intercultural competence training has been incorporated into the daily teaching of freshmen's English skills courses (listening, speaking, reading and writing). 34 questionnaires were received, representing a response rate of 89%, of which 27 are valid. Questionnaires were analyzed through SPSS22.0. The points of each variable of description items were averaged for the variables of the

data analysis, and the four variables of awareness, attitude, knowledge and skill were averaged for the total points of intercultural competence. The inherent consistency of each variable met the statistical requirement and showed normal distribution. The variable names were shown in Table 1.

The analysis of the study data included: 1) calculation and description of intercultural competence variables and English course assessing variables; 2) based on the profile of variables, test on the correlation of intercultural competence variables with in-class learning engagement, independent learning engagement, validity of teaching approaches, degree in upgrade of English skills, and course satisfaction; 3) test on the correlation of each variables of intercultural communication competence with in-class learning engagement, independent learning engagement, validity of teaching methods, degree in upgrade of English skills, and course satisfaction; 4) independent sample T test on the descriptive variable of student background and the dependent variable of intercultural competence; and 5) independent sample T test on the independent variable of engagement in English related activities and the dependent variable of intercultural communication competence.

Table 1. Variable Name

Student identity information	intercultural competence scale	Scale for assessment of English courses
Gender	Self-rating of intercultural knowledge	Self-rating of learning engagement in English class (attention, participation, interaction, feedback based improvement)
Highest educational level of parents	Self-rating of intercultural attitude	Self-rating of independent learning engagement after English class (goal setting, learning progress monitoring, improvement and reflection, self-evaluation, application of class knowledge and skills)
Place of high school (urban / suburb)	Self-rating of intercultural skill	Assessment of the validity of teaching methods (assessment of curriculum objectives, content, organization, assessment, training of learning and thinking methods, heuristic thinking and self-regulation of learning)
	Self-rating of intercultural awareness	Self-rating of engagement in English related activities
		Assessment of the degree in upgrade of English skills (improvement of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and social & cultural knowledge)
		Assessment of English course satisfaction (comprehensive assessment of listening, speaking, reading and writing courses and assessment of the overall English learning experience)

4. Research Results and Analysis

4.1. Students' Overall Level of Intercultural Communication Competence

The data of Table 2 were obtained by analyzing the mean value and standard deviation of the 4 factors of sample's intercultural communication competence.

Table 2. Comparison of the Overall Level of Intercultural Communication Competence

	Mean	Standard deviation
Awareness	4.19	0.59
Attitude	3.59	0.53
Skill	3.63	0.42
Knowledge	2.73	0.55

As observed from the data in Table 2, the self-rating results of the student sample showed the highest level of their intercultural awareness in intercultural communication competence, followed by intercultural attitude and intercultural skill, and finally intercultural knowledge. The overall level of students' self-rating of intercultural competence as shown in this pilot study was basically consistent with the results of questionnaires for assessment of intercultural competence of the large college sample in China [10] [11], representing the most obviously insufficient intercultural knowledge, and the most highly rated intercultural awareness. The results of self-rating of intercultural competence largely reflected the level of students' intercultural communication competence, and can help teachers understand the students' current intercultural level. However, the qualitative interviews and course assessment questionnaire data were triangulated to find that students' self-rating also reflected their lack of perceiving and deviations in understanding intercultural competence. For example, intercultural awareness was the most highly rated among students' self-ratings, as students generally believed that they were good at observing cultural differences and were aware that individuals might have specific behaviors and habitual preferences as a consequence of influences by cultural contexts. However, it was found from the detailed description by students in the interviews about intercultural experiences that students' observed cultural differences were limited to the differences in living habits and ways of expression, without identifying the impact of differences in cultural identity (the identity or feeling of belonging to a group as part of a person's self-conception which is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture), values and culture in social contexts. Also, students tended to attribute the poor communication in a intercultural context to the "quality" of the communicators, and the failure to recognize the causes of the resulting prejudice

and misunderstanding made them unable to adjust the communicative strategy to facilitate the communication in a timely fashion. Therefore, the objective assessment of students' intercultural awareness and attitude, as well as the level of sensitivity and critical ability of cultural differences needed further research.

4.2. Influencing Factors of College English Courses on the Overall Level of Intercultural Communication Competence

The influence of student background, engagement in English related campus activities, and English course assessment on the overall level of intercultural competence were discussed respectively based on findings of correlation between college English courses and the overall level of intercultural communication competence.

First of all, to explore the influence of individual differences on intercultural communication competence, and examine whether there were background factors, we conducted a series of independent sample T tests on the descriptive variable of student background and the dependent variable of college students' intercultural communication competence. The test results showed that the mean of intercultural communication competence was 3.52 for female students and 3.49 for male students, representing no significant difference between the two ($t=-0.155$, $p=0.878$). The mean of intercultural communication competence was 3.61 for students whose high schools were located in urban areas, and 3.24 for those who went to suburban high schools, representing a significant difference ($t=2.64$, $p=0.014$). The mean (3.52) of intercultural competence of students whose either parent had bachelor degree or above regarding the highest level of education and the mean (3.52) of those whose parents had bachelor degree or below showed no significant difference ($t=0.013$, $p=0.990$). Therefore, students' gender and the educational level of their parents had no significant influence on the intercultural level, while the place where they received high school education brought about a significant difference in students' intercultural level. Given the factor of student background, teachers can determine the strategies employed in intercultural teaching according to students' differences. The specific results were shown in Table 3.

Secondly, the results of independent T test on the independent variable of whether students had participated in various English related activities and the dependent variable of intercultural competence were shown in Table 4. The test results showed that the mean of intercultural competence was 3.75 for students who had communicated or cooperated with people from different countries, and 3.46 for those who had never been involved in a intercultural communication or cooperation, representing no significant difference between the two ($t=-2.91$, $p=0.008$); 4.02 for students who had engaged in an English

(either relevant to a theme or as language of communication) related social practice or survey, and 3.48 for those who had never, representing a significant difference ($t = -2.21$, $p = 0.036$); What is more, no significant differences could be observed for any other activities: for example, the mean of intercultural

competence was 3.64 for students who had participated in exhibitions, shows or other social activities with English as the language of communication, and 3.46 for those who had never participated in such activities, representing no significant difference between the two ($t = -1.22$, $p = 0.233$).

Table 3. Independent Sample T Test on the Descriptive Variable of Student Background and the Dependent Variable of College Students' Intercultural Competence

	Sample number (N)	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	Degree of freedom (df)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender				25	-0.155	0.878
Male	5	3.49	0.36			
Female	22	3.52	0.37			
Place of high school				25	2.64	0.014*
Urban	20	3.61	0.36			
Suburb	7	3.24	0.20			
Level of education of parents				25	0.013	0.990
Bachelor degree or above	12	3.52	0.36			
Bachelor degree or below	15	3.52	0.38			

* $p < 0.05$

Table 4. Independent T Test on the Independent Variable of Whether Students Have Participated in Various English Related Activities and the Dependent Variable of Intercultural Competence

	Sample number N	Mean M	Standard deviation SD	Degree of freedom df	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value
Whether having participated in exhibitions, shows or other social activities with English as the language of communication				25	-1.22	0.233
No	18	3.46	0.32			
Yes	9	3.64	0.43			
Whether having communicated or cooperated with people from different countries				25	-2.91	0.008**
No	17	3.38	0.30			
Yes	10	3.75	0.35			
Whether having engaged in an English (either relevant to a theme or as language of communication) related social practice or survey				25	-2.21	0.036*
No	25	3.48	0.33			
Yes	2	4.02	0.50			
Whether having engaged in an English (either relevant to a theme or as language of communication) related volunteer activity				25	-0.684	0.500
No	22	3.49	0.33			
Yes	5	3.62	0.52			
Whether having joined an English related group				25	-1.05	0.306
No	25	3.50	0.37			
Yes	2	3.77	0.14			
Whether having taken a standardized English test (CET-4/6, TOEFL, IELTS, etc.)				25	-0.14	0.890
No	23	3.51	0.35			
Yes	4	3.54	0.48			

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Despite the positive effects of all the above English related activities on the improvement of students' foreign language proficiency and overall quality, the T test showed more significant effect on enhancing intercultural communication competence of participating in some English related activities such as social practices, compared to other English activities such as training sessions and volunteer activities. Therefore, teachers and schools may encourage and organize such activities more purposefully, so that students may have a more definite goal when they participate in related campus and social activities.

Thirdly, to understand the correlation between the level of intercultural competence and students' learning engagement in English courses and course effects, we analyzed the correlation of Pearson product-moment through SPSS according to the distribution of variables. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Analysis of Correlation Between the level of intercultural competence and students' learning engagement and course effects

	Correlation coefficient	<i>p</i>
Students' in-class engagement	0.456	0.017*
Autonomous learning engagement	0.586	0.001**
Degree in upgrade of English skills	0.400	0.039*
Validity of teaching methods	0.604	0.001**
Course satisfaction	0.050	0.805

The results showed that there was a significant positive correlation between students' in-class engagement, after-class autonomous learning engagement, degree in upgrade of English skills and validity of teachers' teaching and students' intercultural competence. The correlation between the validity of teachers' teaching ($r = 0.604$, $p = 0.001$), and autonomous learning engagement ($r = 0.586$, $p = 0.001$) and intercultural competence was particularly prominent. On the contrary, students' course satisfaction was not significantly related to their intercultural competence.

In the questionnaire, the validity of teaching included general teaching requirements, such as clarifying teaching objectives, giving feedback on assignments and tests timely, explaining key and difficult points in different ways, and stimulating students' autonomous learning; it also included the teaching methods recommended by intercultural teaching theories[12], such as encouraging students to approach and analyze problems from multiple perspectives, guiding their reflection on cultural values and explorations for different cultures. The results of qualitative interview data and quantitative data tended to be consistent. The more frequently effective teaching methods were implemented in class with more varieties and better assessment results, the higher the level of students'

intercultural competence is. Similarly, students who were more engaged with autonomous learning tended to demonstrate a higher intercultural communicative level. Thus it can be seen that the correlation of variables suggested in the combined data of the two questionnaires not only proved the validity of intercultural teaching methods in intercultural teaching theories, but also provided favorable evidence at the operational level.

4.3. Influence of College English Courses on the Variables of Intercultural Competence

The analysis of the correlation between each factor of intercultural competence (attitude, awareness, knowledge, and skill) and each variable of English course assessment showed that there was a correlation between the different factors of intercultural competence and the different variables of course assessment. The intercultural attitude was significantly and positively correlated with students' in-class engagement ($r = 0.456$, $p = 0.017$) and autonomous learning engagement ($r = 0.519$, $p = 0.006$). The intercultural knowledge also showed a significant positive correlation with the two variables of in-class engagement ($r = 0.458$, $p = 0.016$) and autonomous learning engagement ($r = 0.439$, $p = 0.022$). The validity of teaching methods was significantly and positively correlated with the other two factors of intercultural competence: intercultural skill ($r = 0.444$, $p = 0.020$) and intercultural awareness ($r = 0.456$, $p = 0.017$). While the degree in students' improvement of English skills as a whole was significantly correlated with intercultural comprehensive ability, it showed no significant correlation with the individual factor of any intercultural competence.

The internal relation between the variables of intercultural competence and English course learning related factors provided appropriate guiding significance for design of intercultural teaching in English courses. The teaching methods listed in intercultural theories, such as fostering students' critical cultural awareness, and training students' ability of evaluative analysis of cultural events using classroom interactions and discussions, were proven in quantitative statistical analysis to have significant correlation with the improvement of students' intercultural awareness. In English teaching which is aimed at improving intercultural awareness, teachers can adopt and emphasize such teaching methods. Also, there was a significant positive correlation between intercultural knowledge and students' in-class and after-class learning engagement. It means that teachers can emphasize in-class attention when teaching social and cultural knowledge, or promote the improvement of intercultural knowledge by providing sources and resources of autonomous learning [13][14]. Therefore, the application of these findings in practical teaching can effectively guide and enhance the students' intercultural level through English skills courses

in a more purposeful manner. In this way, the efficiency of teaching for development of intercultural competence during and after class is maximized while the teaching quality is improved.

5. Conclusions

Based on the intercultural teaching in English courses of non-language majors from Northwestern Polytechnical University, in conjunction with questionnaires for assessment of intercultural competence level and English courses, supported by student interviews, this paper analyzed and discussed the factors in skill-based English courses which influence intercultural communication competence. The findings showed that such course factors as students' in-class engagement, autonomous learning ability and the validity of teaching methods exerted great influence on the overall level and specific variable of intercultural communication competence, while the degree in upgrade of English skills and course satisfaction had no significant influence on intercultural competence; both of different student backgrounds and campus learning environment had significant differences with the level of intercultural competence. It is of great significance to clarify these internal relations for a comprehensive and systematic construction of the ways to develop intercultural competence in foreign language teaching and for an accurate and effective improvement of intercultural teaching efficiency. The detailed analysis of the variables of intercultural competence and English course related factors also provided the foothold for foreign language teachers to practice the objectives of intercultural competence development. The efforts presented in this paper belonged to the pilot study included in the broad study of the reform of the course system for cultivation of intercultural communication competence. The follow-up study will examine and compare the applicability of the findings in the larger sample. After the course factors that influence the intercultural competence were identified, it is still necessary to deeply quantify the influence of all the factors, and further build a model of the influence of English course factors on the intercultural communication competence.

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