

# Impact of Intercultural Learning Program on Language Learners' Intercultural Competence\*

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As institutions of higher education continue to internationalize, the number of exchanged students climbs ever higher in China. It is important to know what they have gained in the intercultural learning experiences in terms of attitudes, awareness, and knowledge, which are the three constructed dimensions of Intercultural Competence in this study. A qualitative research is conducted by using interview and seven English language learners are investigated to explore their learning outcomes in the intercultural learning program. From the thematic analysis of the interviews, it can be found that these English language learners' intercultural competence has been improved during their stay in USA. They successfully overcome cultural shock, hold positive attitudes toward target culture and people, become more confident in English study, and acquire more cultural knowledge. The research outcomes contribute to promoting intercultural learning effectiveness and improving learners' intercultural competence.

*Keywords:* intercultural program, intercultural learning, intercultural competence, English learners

## Introduction

Due to the ever-increasing pace of globalization and mobility across national borders, the past decades have seen a dramatic growth in international student exchange programs worldwide. Teachers and learners often agree that one of the best ways to learn a foreign language is through cross-border education (Isabelli, 2004; Kuntz & Belnap, 2001). Studying abroad has long served as a primary method of preparing students for a global world and can be one of the most valuable means by which students gain intercultural skills and knowledge. This is especially true for language learners. Studying abroad offers a different level and type of language input, opportunities for interaction, and exposure to the target culture on a daily basis. Therefore, language learners often regard intercultural programs as a precious opportunity to promote their intercultural competence and most of them are willing to take part in the program during their four-year university study. At the same time, it is imperative that we pay attention to what actually transpires when students move to another cultural and linguistic context to study in order to be in a better position to design pre-sojourn programs and determine the most effective ways to support their intercultural experience, intercultural learning, and second language development during their stays abroad (Jackson, 2013).

In this article, a qualitative research was conducted based on seven undergraduate students who major in English in China. The students all took part in a three-month Work and Travel program in the USA.

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\* **Acknowledgements:** This paper is one of the research results of the project "Cognitive Research in Intercultural Language Teaching" sponsored by Chongqing Liberal Arts Key Base, 2014 (Grant No. 20500710).

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The research question would center on the their gains in the program in terms of intercultural competence, that is, What have the English language learners gained in the program in terms of attitude, awareness, and knowledge respectively?

### **Overview of Intercultural Competence**

The aim of language teaching is to make its learners competent enough to perform effectively and appropriately with members of another language-culture background on their terms (Fantini, 2000). To achieve the above mentioned aim, “Communicative competence” was first introduced as the knowledge which enabled someone to use a language effectively and their ability actually to use this knowledge for communication by Hymes in 1970 (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). Canale and Swain (1981) further developed the term with an explicit emphasis on a sociocultural knowledge to understand communication as being: based on sociocultural interpersonal interaction, to involve unpredictability and creativity, to take place in a discourse and sociocultural context, to be purposive behavior, to be carried out under performance constraints, to involve use of authentic language, and to be judged as successful or not on the basis of behavioral outcomes.

Canale and Swain’s model of communicative competence are all based on an underlying assumption that the communicative norm is the native speaker interacting with another native speaker and seeking to model learners’ proficiency in terms of the demands of and knowledge involved in such interactions. At the same time, they exclude knowledge, identities, and attitudes developed as part of L1 (first language) experiences from the model.

To move beyond communicative competence, Byram and Zarate (1994) have established an extended concept model of intercultural competence which revolves around four sets of skills, attitudes, and knowledge, which they describe using the French term *savoir* “knowing”. These *savoirs* are:

- (1) “Knowings”: knowledge of self and other, of interaction: individual and societal;
- (2) “Knowing how to understand”: skills for interpreting and relating information;
- (3) “Knowing how to learn/to do”: skills for discovering new knowledge and for interacting to gain new knowledge;
- (4) “Knowing how to be”: attitudes involved in relativizing the self and valuing the other.

To these four, Byram (1997) has added a fifth component:

- (5) “Knowing how to commit oneself”: education involving the development of critical and political awareness.

This particular view of intercultural competence examining higher level competencies, while developed specifically in the context of foreign language teaching, does not specifically deal with the interrelationship of these components and linguistic competence *per se*.

Later on, Byram (1997) has tried to articulate this relationship with four elements involved:

- (1) Linguistic competence: knowledge of the linguistic code: lexicon, syntax, morphology, semantics, and phonology;
- (2) Sociolinguistic competence: appropriate selection of language forms for audience and context;
- (3) Discourse competence: appropriate structuring of the language in the production or reception of texts;
- (4) Intercultural competence: the five *savoirs* of (Byram & Zarate, 1994).

Byram (1997) sees these four components as being interdependent and mutually influencing, although in some way separable for the purposes of description and assessment.

A further development of such an approach can be seen in the work of Meyer (2000), who argues that intercultural competence is a combination of social and communicative skills, including: empathy; ability to deal with conflict; ability to work collaboratively; flexibility; foreign language awareness; awareness that culture causes different discussion styles, speech speeds, interpretation, and thought patterns; techniques for handling interactional difficulties; reflection on one's own cultural background; tolerance of ambiguity.

In Meyer's model, however, the linguistic component of intercultural competence is much reduced, except at the level of awareness. The model does not explicitly include second language use as an element of the competence.

For the purpose of this study, the linguistic competence, "knowing how to learn/to do" and "knowing how to be" from Byram's model of Intercultural Competence (1997) will be considered as a priority dimension, together with component of awareness from the work of Meyer (2000).

Thus the framework of intercultural competence in this study is adopted as follows:

Attitude:

- (1) Openness: new thinking, welcoming strangers, and acceptance;
- (2) Personal autonomy: inner purpose, focus on goals;
- (3) Self-efficacy.

Awareness:

- (1) Tolerance: recognize and tolerates other cultures and cultural diversity, effectively overcomes the problem of culture shock;
- (2) Communicative awareness: can communicate effectively and correctly with others in realistic situations by using strategies.

Knowledge:

- (1) Cultural knowledge: information gathering; valuing difference;
- (2) Linguistic competence: knowledge of the linguistic code: lexicon, syntax, morphology, semantics, and phonology.

### **Literature Review of Intercultural Learning Outcomes**

Much empirical research has investigated how studying abroad affects learners. Research has examined gains in oral fluency (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004), lexical and grammar development (Guntermann, 1995; Isabelli, 2004), the acquisition of phonology (Simoes, 1996; Diaz, 2004), reading competence (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1995; Lapkin, Hart, & Swain, 1995), listening comprehension skills (Allen, 2002; Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1995; Kinginger, 2008), sociolinguistic skills (Barron, 2006; Hassall, 2006), strategy use (Lafford, 2004; Gao, 2006), and student perspectives on language learning (Isabelli, 2006; Tarp, 2006).

Despite the comprehensive research on almost all aspects of the intercultural competence, the researchers mainly focused on the language knowledge and skill gains. We could hardly find the research on the students' gains in cultural knowledge. Besides, there is a lack of study on the changes of attitude and awareness afforded by such an experience.

Moreover, previous research reported that intercultural program favored weaker learners, which has since been confirmed by a large number of researchers (Brecht & Robinson, 1995; Freed, 1998; Diaz, 2004). This recurrent finding has at times been interpreted as a phenomenon consistent with an S-shaped learning curve

with slow beginning, steep acceleration, and plateau (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1995). In the case of Second Language Acquisition, the advanced learners' apparent stabilization might be explained by the fact that they may have enough language resources at their disposal to cope with their communicative needs. Alternatively, it may be argued that advanced second language learners experience growth in areas that are not so commonly measured, such as certain types of grammar rules or sophisticated vocabulary, and in skills that are more difficult to quantify such as effectiveness in conveying the intended message (Collentine, 2004). In contrast, the weaker learners may have made the quickest progress in gains that are better reflected by the instruments and measures used in this study (Freed, 1998).

So as Llanes and Carmen (2008) have pointed out that it would be interesting for future research to seek to identify measures that could unveil the progress made at advanced levels during a stay abroad.

Besides, the study on students' gains from the intercultural study is inadequate in China, while more and more intercultural programs aiming at Chinese students have been implemented. It is necessary to find out what Chinese students obtain from this program.

Therefore, this study would mainly focuses on the intercultural outcomes in terms of intercultural competence for advanced Chinese language learners based on the revised model.

### **Participants**

The participants are seven English major students from a key university from Southwest China and as they are in their second or third year of study, they can be reasonably regarded as advanced language learners. They took part in Work and Travel USA Program through some selective procedures. Work and Travel USA is a program of international culture exchange that allows students from different countries of the world to depart on summer vacations, usually three months, to the United States to work and travel. Among the seven participants, there were six females and one male with a mean age of 21 years old. All were born in China and spoke Chinese as a first language. Four participants who were in their second year of university study took part in the program from June, 2013 to September, 2013 and three participants who were in their third year of study took part in the program from June, 2014 to September, 2014. As for the jobs they took, three of them were housekeepers, and the other four worked as housekeeper and waitress, cook and housekeeper, cashier and shop assistant, shop assistant and housekeeper respectively.

### **Research Procedures**

Interview was used as the research instrument in conducting this qualitative study. After returning from the Work and Travel Program in the USA, the seven participants were individually interviewed. Topics mainly focused on the three aspects of intercultural competence: attitude, awareness, and knowledge. The individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in Chinese to facilitate a deeper understanding of what actually happened when they were in the United States. The interviews were conducted in December, 2014. To make the participants feel comfortable with the interview, the interview atmosphere was casual, allowing experiences shared authentically. The average length for each interview was around 60 minutes. The raw data were tape-recorded with permission of the participants, then transcribed into written form and later subjected to thematic analysis.

## Results and Discussion

The data were grouped into different themes according to three dimensions of Intercultural Competence and some of the typical data from different elements of each dimension will be presented and analyzed below.

### Theme One: Attitude

**Openness.** Intercultural experiences they had gone through in the America affected participants' openness to make friends with foreign people, as some of the participants described:

I might be not that excited as I used to be when I saw a foreigner now. Because when I stayed in the US, I came across some foreigners who were unwilling to talk with me. They seemed indifferent to me, even unfriendly. For example, our co-workers were unwilling to talk with us. There even seemed to be an obstacle between us. (Student G, personal communication, December 18, 2014)

I was not sure whether I was willing to make friends with foreigners because I came across some unfriendly foreigners. For example, one of our co-workers stole things from us. And we did not have a good relationship with our boss. But we still met friendly Americans who would offer a free ride for us. Besides, it would not be something special for me to see a foreigner in the street since I had met so many foreigners in the United States. (Student A, personal communication, December 17, 2014)

I may be unwilling to make friends with foreigners because some of them were hostile to me. One of my co-workers loved drinking so he was not in a good condition when he was working. One time, when we were working, he pushed me and our boss saw it from the camera. Then, he was sent back. And when he came to work the other day, he was hostile to me. (Student E, personal communication, December 19, 2014)

I was willing to make foreign friends since they were very nice. We always received help from local people. We lived in a host family. The host and her daughter were very nice to us. They knew we had not been here before, so they offered to take us to many local activities. One of our co-workers was a 14-year-old boy. He got along well with us. We met his family members and his mother even treated us like her daughters. (Student C, personal communication, December 18, 2014)

We could infer from the above information that students' abroad experience would strongly influence their openness to and acceptance of foreigners. From their description, interviewees who often received help from foreigners and had a good relationship with their co-workers tended to have a good impression of foreigners. Since this program focused more on work, most of the local people the participants came into contact with were their co-workers, thus their relationship with their co-workers could partly reflect their relationship with local people. Interviewees are more likely to hold a good impression towards foreigners if they have a good relationship with foreigners in their working experiences and thus they are more willing to make friends with them after the program.

**Personal autonomy.** While expressing their personal autonomy during the program, many participants noted that they had their own targets in English learning.

During the program, I would initiatively find opportunities to use English. (Student E, personal communication, December 19, 2014)

I should find my own opportunities to use the language. (Student C, personal communication, December 18, 2014)

I would pay attention to native speakers' words, expressions, intonation, and pronunciation. (Student A, personal communication, December 17, 2014)

I would voluntarily use the newly learned words, expressions, and try the intonation and pronunciation. (Student G, personal communication, December 18, 2014)

The interview showed that the English language learners all held a very strong inner purpose on using and learning English during the program. And this personal autonomy would maximize their language learning outcomes.

**Self-efficacy.** When participants were asked whether this program helped them feel more confident in English learning, all of them gave positive answers:

I felt more confident when learning things about America like history and geography. After this program, when teachers talked about Maine, I felt very familiar because I had been there. The knowledge in the book now became dynamic and real to me. For example, before I had gone to America, I had known the Americans were against abortion, but it was normal in China. I did not see what was wrong in abortion. However, when I got America, my host was strongly against abortion and thought that was murder. We talked about that several times and I started to think about abortion all over again in different situations. (Student C, personal communication, December 18, 2014)

I was confident in my ability to learn English successfully. I used to think all the Americans had a good command of English; however I changed my mind when I got there. Many people were immigrants and their English mingled with their mother tongue. Some had not received higher education so their English were not so good. Knowing that the English of local people did not better than me really gave me encouragement to speak English. (Student E, personal communication, December 19, 2014)

I was not afraid of making mistakes when speaking with others. When I was in America, in a totally unfamiliar environment, I often did not know how to express my ideas when I asked directions, but I could describe or point it. People could totally understand what I meant. Then I realized it is not essential to speak fluent English to make people understood. And they did not mind whether your English was good or poor. (Student A, personal communication, December 17, 2014)

I used to be very shy and afraid that people could not get my point so I was unwilling to speak. Now I had more courage to speak English. Once I called to check my account balance. At first I did not know how to express, but the assistant still understood what I meant. When they spoke very fast, I kept asking them to slow down and eventually I figured out what they meant. (Student F, personal communication, December 16, 2014)

I used to worry that people would laugh at my poor pronunciation or grammar, so I was afraid to speak English. But when I spoke to the local people, I found no one would pick up your mistakes as long as you could make meanings across. (Student B, personal communication, December 17, 2014)

The interview suggested that all the participants felt more confident in English learning, and the reasons could be summarized as: Firstly, most of the students did not have chance to speak to native speakers at home, and they were afraid of making mistakes. While in America, they were forced to use English and it turned out that making mistakes was not a big deal. Secondly, some students realized that not all native speakers could speak good English, which made them psychologically feel more confident in themselves. Thirdly, staying in America gave the students chances to have a deep understanding of real English culture. They could verify what they learnt in the classroom and discovered what they did not know before.

### **Theme Two: Awareness**

**Tolerance.** All the participants expressed that they could adjust to the differences between living at home and abroad and the main differences included diet and transportation, as the following excerpts illustrated:

I could eventually adjust to the difference between living at home and abroad. I thought the main differences lay in eating and shopping. The American shopping style was buying a lot of things all at once and hoarded the stuff at home. I could not get used to their diet in a short time. I could eat French fries and hamburgers once in a while but I could not eat that all the time. I really missed Chinese food like rice when I lived in the US. (Student C, personal communication, December 18, 2014)

I thought the biggest difference was diet and the second biggest difference was transportation. I did not like their food. Once I took part in a wedding, they mainly ate cheese. And they ate a lot chips and drank carbonated beverage in the meal. There was a Subway near our apartment. I saw people always grab a bag of chips and a can of coke. I thought that was really unhealthy. I really wanted to eat vegetables but the vegetables there were very expensive. We could only buy necessities once a week, because the supermarket was very far from where we lived and the public transportation was inconvenient. (Student A, personal communication, December 17, 2014)

It was not hard for me to adjust to the American culture. Diet and transportation were the most notable differences. We often cooked our own food and it seemed we could manage things well. (Student G, personal communication, December 18, 2014)

Tolerance in the framework refers to recognizing other cultures and cultural diversity and effectively overcoming the problem of culture shock. Participants all agreed that they perceived many differences between living at home and abroad. The most notable differences were diet and transportation. All the interviews showed that it took some time for the students to overcome cultural shock, and gradually adapt to a different culture and begin to value culture differences.

**Communicative awareness.** In real life situations, students learned to use some strategies like description and body language to make effective communication.

After taking part in this program, I knew to use description when I did not know how to express in English. (Student G, personal communication, December 18, 2014)

I would use body language to express myself sometimes. (Student C, personal communication, December 18, 2014)

Their answers showed that English language learners all acquired communicative awareness—ability to communicate effectively and correctly in realistic situations by using strategies after taking part in the program.

### **Theme Three: Knowledge**

**Cultural knowledge.** After taking part in the program, most of the interviewees held a different towards both Americans and American culture. The following comments were typical:

I used to be very afraid of the Black people. But when my friend and I arrived in the New York, our first stop in the United States, we received help from a Black young man who helped us carry luggage and our impressions towards Black people changed. And I found not all I learned in the classroom could correspond to my experience. Before I arrived in America, I was told that it was not respectful to ask someone's age. While when I got there, many Americans asked my age. Another fact that really impressed me was that there was also a large gap between rich and poor in America. Although lots of people there carried coach bags, still many could not afford a house. You could see almost everyone there could use good mobile phones like Iphone or Samsung but that did not mean they were rich. (Student C, personal communication, December 18, 2014)

I hold a different view towards Americans. Before I arrived in America, I thought all the Americans were very nice. However, when I got there, I found some were very arrogant. Still, there were very friendly Americans. They helped you without asking anything in return. In the past, I did not have much access to get to know the American culture, just through TV series and Hollywood movies. You knew, it only showed the brightest part of America. Now I got a panorama view of American culture. (Student E, personal communication, December 19, 2014)

I used to hold a very traditional view that all the Americans were noble, respected others, and were well off. While as I arrived in America, I found things were different. The Americans also held a sense of distance. They seemed indifferent to others. (Student A, personal communication, December 17, 2014)

I used to think all the Americans lead a prosperous life while I immediately found that was not true when I arrived there. (Student F, personal communication, December 16, 2014)

From the above interviews, we could see that through contacting with local people, participants were gathering information about target culture and got their culture knowledge expanded. For example, as it was pointed out in the interview, before having the intercultural study, most of the students got to know the Americans and American culture through Hollywood movies and TV series, which were misleading to some degree. After staying in America for three months, most of the students held a panoramic view towards Americans and American culture. They expressed that not all Americans were rich and warmhearted and they could feel discrimination in America.

**Linguistic competence.** The interviewees' knowledge of the linguistic code in terms of speaking, reading, listening, and writing was improved.

I think my vocabulary is largely improving. I can use more various words in my speech. (Student F, personal communication, December 16, 2014)

I think my listening and speaking are largely improving though my writing gets almost no improvement. (Student A, personal communication, December 17, 2014)

I think my speaking is largely improving. I think I am becoming a fluent speaker. The pause and hesitation become less in my speech. And my reading is moderately improving. (Student G, personal communication, December 18, 2014)

I think I have more ideas and have less grammatical errors in my speech. Besides, I think my pronunciation and intonation are largely improving. I do not think my writing is largely improving since I do not have many chances to write. (Student E, personal communication, December 19, 2014)

All the seven participants expressed their speaking and listening skills were largely improving and their reading skills were moderately improving, while their writing skills got almost no improvement. Their improvements in speaking were reflected by their less hesitation and pause, less grammatical errors, more various vocabulary, and better intonation in their speech. The findings verified the previous research that students' speaking skills were largely improved in various aspects.

### Major Findings

The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that English language learners' attitude, awareness, and knowledge were all affected by the intercultural program.

Firstly, English majors' attitudes towards communication and interaction with foreigners were reshaped through their intercultural experience. Students who had a good relationship with their co-workers or friends tended to be more positive to communicate and interact with foreigners.

Secondly, intercultural program helped English language learners become more confident in learning English. Students felt a sense of safety after frequently using English to communicate. Besides, after experiencing American culture, English language learners felt more confident in culture learning.

Thirdly, while abroad, English language learners could effectively overcome the symptoms of culture shock and tolerate cultural diversity. Many participants mentioned that they had learned intercultural course and searched for information about the target culture before they arrived in America, which helped them to adjust to the new environment.

Fourthly, during the program, English language learners were improving their cultural knowledge, linguistic competence and sociolinguistic competence. English language learners tended to have a stronger inner purpose to observe the surroundings, to speak with foreigners, and to pay attention to their expressions.



And their speaking, listening, and reading skills were improving, with less grammatical errors, using various words and less pause and hesitation in their speech.

The type of work would better allow students to have more chances to talk with people like salesman. From the above analysis, the type of work largely determines the students' daily frequency of using English, which greatly contributes to students' improvement in speaking and listening skills.

Staying with American families can help students know American culture better. Participants who stayed with American families tended to observe more difference between American culture and Chinese culture through their daily conversation and activities with the American family. Additionally, students with American families are easier to accept these differences and have more positive reply about their journey.

Besides, participants in the interviews expressed their attitude to maximize intercultural experience with more supportive organized exchange program.

### Conclusion

It is believed that intercultural learning usually generates "international sophistication" that can be used by students in their subsequent lives and careers. This inquiry has explored the advanced English learners' gains from intercultural experiences, especially in awareness, attitude, and cultural knowledge, which prove that intercultural program indeed improves students' horizon for language study and deepens their understanding of the target culture. At the same time, students' stereotypes have been revised and new knowledge about target people and society has been created. All of these gains will have important influences which on the one hand contribute to development of intercultural competences and on the other hand strengthen their confidence in using the target language in life. The results from this research bring to light the practices and impact of the program by highlighting that in order to get real positive educational impact students need to be prepared for and assist during their intercultural endeavors and more opportunities should be created and sustained for students to participate in more meaningful experiences. However, there is a clear need for extra research on how to optimize the existing programs and improve students overall intercultural competence.

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