

Fostering Intercultural Communicative Competence in Writing: A Preliminary Study

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The deepening of internationalization has promoted intercultural communication. Countries around the world have established education policies on intercultural communication, highlighting the importance of intercultural communicative competence. The paper offers a preliminary study of how to foster learners' intercultural communicative competence in writing. It first elaborates intercultural communicative competence and the factors that cause intercultural communication failures, and then proposes a variety of writing strategies to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence. Suggestions on how to improve English teachers' intercultural communicative competence are also provided.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, English writing, writing strategies

Introduction

Intercultural communication was first proposed by the American cultural anthropologist Edward Hall in *The Silent Language* in 1959. Intercultural communication is communication between people with different cultural perceptions and sign systems (Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 1998). Deardorff (2006) argues that the most popular definition of intercultural communicative competence, which is based on the individual's cross-cultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes, is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately. It is generally believed that intercultural communication involves verbal or non-verbal communication among individuals of different cultures (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Spitzberg, 2000; Kim, 2001; Deardorff, 2006; Emert & Pearson, 2007). Due to the different cultural backgrounds of the two parties, different cultural customs, lifestyles, ways of thinking, and non-verbal communication are indispensable to the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence.

Globalization has impacted people and communities across the globe and significantly influenced sustainable development in the world's economies, cultures, and populations; therefore, the need for intercultural communication has increased dramatically. Many nations have developed close relationships and interdependence with each other, showing the importance of intercultural communication (Alicia, Christos, Miguel, Valentina, Franz, & Georgeta-Paula, 2010). The cultivation of intercultural communicative competence has accordingly become an important part of foreign language teaching and research (Byram, 2000; Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Kneebone, 2007).

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It is of great help to language learners to facilitate their intercultural communicative competence, and language teachers, especially those teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), should first themselves be competent intercultural communicators with great confidence and sufficient experience. Most studies have discussed the cultivation as well as implementation of intercultural communicative competence in language education, but have rarely offered specific teaching methods for writing. This paper proposes a variety of writing strategies aimed at developing learners' intercultural communicative competence; suggestions on how to improve English teachers' intercultural communicative competence are also provided.

Intercultural Communicative Competence in English Teaching

As is well known, intercultural communication gives full play to learners' language learning from a cross-linguistic perspective, improves their language application skills, and enhances their thinking in the target language. In what follows, the importance of intercultural communication in English teaching will be addressed and two factors of intercultural communication failure will be introduced to pave the way for a more detailed exploration of writing strategies to foster intercultural communicative competence.

The Importance of Intercultural Communication in English Teaching

Language teachers and teaching researchers are confident that it is of great significance to cultivate learners' intercultural communicative competence. Language cannot be separated from culture. One cannot learn a language well without an understanding of the culture of the target language or the differences between cultures. Therefore, to learn a language well, we should not only master the "structural rules" involving its pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and pragmatics, but also its "rules of use". From foreign relations between countries to greetings and appointments between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, "rules of use" should be applied appropriately, as these rules embody different cultural values. In order to improve learners' language skills and realize effective cross-cultural communication, the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence should be the focus of foreign language teaching.

Language is a part of its culture. Culture here is being used, in the linguistic and anthropological sense, to refer to all aspects of human life insofar as they are determined by membership in a society. As thus defined and envisaged, culture covers a very wide area of human life, and language is manifestly a part of it, probably the most important part. It is not an overstatement that learning foreign cultures is just as important as learning their languages. Like language, culture is a symbolic system we use to understand the world around us and how we construct it into a subtle, ever-present worldview. Although the faculty of language acquisition and language use is innate and inherited, every individual's language is acquired as a member of society along with and at the same time as other aspects of that society's culture. Language and culture are mutually indispensable. Simply put, it is suggested that the essence of foreign language teaching is intercultural teaching, and the essence of foreign language education is intercultural education.

Scholars have offered a variety of suggestions to facilitate intercultural communicative competence. Most English teachers emphasize instruction in language knowledge and skills, but neglect the cultivation of intercultural communication consciousness and competence. A convenient way to improve learners' intercultural communicative competence is to make cultural comparisons during the daily teaching of foreign language vocabulary, pragmatics, discourse, etc. Language teachers should be familiar with Chinese culture

and western culture as represented by the English language at the level of language, nonverbal communication, modes of thinking, and the comparison of social pragmatics.

Huang (2015) offers Process Culture Teaching to encourage learners to explore the similarities and differences between Chinese and western cultures so as to cultivate their intercultural communicative competence. Under such circumstances, learners use electronic portfolio technology to record the processes of “describing Chinese and Western cultures”, “conducting cultural research”, “writing learning logs”, and “reflecting on learning Chinese and western cultures”.

Angelova and Zhao (2016) propose an Online Cooperative Learning project in which Chinese and American college learners communicate through a discussion board, Skype software, email, and other computer-aided tools on the website, and find that in this way non-native language learners not only improve their language skills, but also raise their awareness of intercultural communication.

Alternatives might include selecting intercultural teaching materials and changing the method of teaching. English teachers can provide learners the opportunity to learn more about culture through homework, or they can strengthen their knowledge of English culture in a number of class activities. In particular, English majors can be offered materials of professional interest to them, such as selected readings of British and American literature, information on the history of British and American literature, and selected readings from British and American newspapers and magazines. In the selection of teaching materials, we should consider learners' English level and the breadth of cultural coverage in intercultural communication teaching.

On the other hand, English teachers should control the quality and quantity of such materials in the teaching process and make full use of modern teaching methods to motivate learners to enthusiastically acquire intercultural communicative competence. In practice, English teachers should vigorously introduce knowledge necessary for better intercultural communication by means of verbal and nonverbal communication instruction, physical objects and pictures to explain abstract concepts, and role playing to promote the development of intercultural communication so as to afford learners the opportunity to grasp the different perspectives of Chinese and western cultures. A fuller discussion of how to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence in English writing instruction will be presented later.

Factors That Cause Intercultural Communication Failures

Before providing a variety of writing strategies to cultivate learners' intercultural communicative competence, language educators and those engaging intercultural communication instruction should be familiar with two factors that cause intercultural communication failures.

Differences in thinking. Chinese native speakers tend to think in a circuitous way, while English native speakers tend to think in a linear way. When English-speaking westerners organize texts, most of the time they proceed straight to their topic. Chinese native speakers tend to turn to things gradually related to the theme. If Chinese learners do not understand these thinking characteristics of westerners, this can easily lead to communication failures, especially when they apply Chinese communication practices or pragmatic rules to English expression in intercultural communication. Let us consider another example. Chinese thinking shows a strong fuzziness, while accuracy is a major feature of western modern thinking. The Chinese understanding of the essence of things is not accurate; unless it is necessary, they pay attention to intuition and understanding and do not usually describe things accurately and clearly.

On the other hand, it is said that accuracy is highly important in western societies and cultures. Modern western experimental science values the classification of things and quantitation-based analysis, which promotes the establishment and development of mathematics, biology, physics, and other disciplines, and also highlights the significance of accuracy. Although the object of thought could be vague, the methods and tools (such as category, definition, logic, rule, law, and formula) used by westerners are quite accurate. Accurate thinking is based on binary logic that uses precise concepts and “either/or” propositions, and requires concepts and propositions to be judged as “either/or” so that no ambiguity or third value is allowed.

Differences in culture. In intercultural communication, the cultural differences between Chinese and western countries accompany great differences in language structure and use. Understanding others’ cultures in one’s own way often leads to misunderstanding. For example, western culture is deeply influenced by the concepts of independence, freedom, and equality; Chinese culture is deeply influenced by Confucian culture, emphasizing the obligations between the monarch and subjects, parents and children, husband and wife, brother and brother, and friends and friends. Therefore, Chinese culture has a strong sense of class as well as strict requirements on appellation. In western society, people like to call each other by their first names, no matter their status or age or of the reason for communication. In Chinese society, when children address their parents, relatives, and superiors, they often have a fixed repertoire of terms of address. Cultural differences between Chinese and westerners are also reflected in family issues. Chinese culture is deeply relied on the family; thus, Chinese pay more attention to individual duties and obligations, where western culture attaches importance to individual freedom and rights.

Writing Strategies to Foster Intercultural Communicative Competence

Following Byram (2009), Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006, 2008), and Savignon (2001), the following writing strategies can be applied to familiarize learners with a broader range of language skills, deepen their understanding of intercultural communication knowledge, and have them examine the differences between Chinese and Western cultures.

Implementing Teaching Methods for Intercultural Communication Writing

“Continuous written dialogue” refers to an activity in which the teacher requires two learners with different native languages to conduct written dialogues on a specific cultural theme. The form for the written dialogue can be traditional letters, e-mails, or social networks (e.g., Weibo). Learners use the target language, say English, to discuss the specific content assigned by the teacher. For example, teachers might ask why Chinese often choose expensive gifts when they send a friend gifts, while Americans value whether the gifts are targeted, that is, whether their friends like the gifts. Throughout the process of writing the dialogues, the two learners need to keep all of the dialogue contents, including mutual feedback, errors, and intercultural misunderstandings. At the end of the activity, the dialogue contents are displayed to the class.

“Fill in information” refers to an activity where the teacher provides a piece of information from an event with a cultural theme for language learners. Learners need to work together in groups to collect all the information needed and complete the text in writing. First, the teacher collects a story or historical event related to the target language culture, such as the *Chibi zhizhan* (Battle of Red Cliffs), only provides and explains some of it, and then divides the learners into groups. Later, each group is responsible for describing the subsequent events with concrete information (such as pictures or photographs). After each group expresses its own opinion on what the picture should show, each learner needs to organize all the information into a written report, and

the teacher then gives appropriate feedback. This activity can promote learners' coherence in writing, cultural knowledge, and cultural imagination.

"Interview writing" involves a group of learners who interview each other in the target language to understand and draw insights from a cultural phenomenon such as Halloween. The learner should then reduce the interview into a written document and compose a formal article. The teacher does not interfere in the interview; instead, after learners finish their work, the teacher gives learners feedback and error correction (particularly cultural misunderstandings). Such an activity can encourage learners to actively seek cultural knowledge and improve their writing skills by revising and summarizing the interview content.

Moreover, translation practice not merely can strengthen learners' reading and writing ability, but expand their visions of intercultural communication. The teacher can provide a Chinese literary work that has been translated into English (for example, selected stories of Lu Xun) and ask the learners to translate the English work into Chinese. After the translation is complete, students compare their own translation with the original works in terms of vocabulary, idioms, sentence patterns, syntactic structures or styles, and cultural characteristics so as to understand the similarities and differences between them. Such translation practice can improve learners' knowledge of English grammar along with intercultural communicative competence.

The activities proposed here not only enhance learners' writing skills, but facilitate their intercultural communicative competence. These activities are more suitable for an advanced class, as language learning with higher cultural information is often suitable for learners with higher degrees. It should be noted, however, that if teachers adhere to their learning objectives and adapt appropriately to the changing circumstance of the modern teaching world, they can make full use of these teaching methods.

Other Factors Cultivating Learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence in Writing

English teachers can cultivate learners' intercultural communication awareness in other ways. First, English teachers should have a deep understanding of their own culture. Only on the basis of apprehending our own culture and respecting other cultures can we improve our intercultural communication awareness and overcome failures in intercultural communication. Also, when most English teachers examine their past teaching experiences, they usually find that they fell short in resources and experience in intercultural communicative competence, particularly personal experience in intercultural interactions, which constitute valuable input for improvements in teaching methodology. Hence, in the training for teaching English as a foreign language, in addition to theoretical knowledge of English language and knowledge of English culture, it is necessary to cultivate teachers' attitudes and practical abilities to respect multi-cultural values as a means of future practice and verification so as to cultivate their intercultural communicative competence. Moreover, teachers can also improve their awareness of intercultural communication by studying abroad, reading academic papers, attending seminars, and using modern learning technologies such as the Internet and multimedia.

Second, instruction in the cultural differences between Chinese and western countries should be offered in many ways. For example, through multimedia materials, social networks, and other advanced learning technology, learners can grasp the dimensions of different cultures; moreover, teachers are supposed to create a realistic context to let students experience cultural differences inside and outside the classroom as well.

Third, it is important to bear in mind that cultivating learners' autonomous learning abilities is crucial. Autonomous learning is the ability of independent learning, critical reflection, and self-determination. With this

ability, learners will be able to perceive themselves, the learning environment, and the direction of learning. The content of intercultural communication covers a wide range of topics. In fact, teachers cannot guide learners at all times. The majority of the students are of the opinion that the language learning provides them with an opportunity to develop their intercultural communicative competence. Even if the language teacher occasionally adopts the role of facilitator, the students are active learners who are prepared and willing to assume the responsibilities associated with innovation and self-growth. Accordingly, in the process of intercultural communicative competence training, learners can learn independently, make learning plans through their own initiative, self-monitor their own learning processes, and seek the best interaction between themselves and the intercultural environment.

Finally, to foster learners' intercultural communicative competence only through curricular learning is difficult to achieve. It is neither easy nor valid to train learners' intercultural communicative competence over a long period. Many courses in school are set up according to the teacher's major, and most of the teachers of teaching English as a foreign language are not from English-speaking countries, so their understanding of English or Western culture is limited. For this reason, the administration of the respective school or the Ministry of Education should increase the number of intercultural communication courses to provide more time and space for those who engage in and are interested in intercultural communicative competence.

Conclusion

In an increasingly global society, each of us is faced with greater cultural challenges; therefore, there is an increasing focus in modern communication on being diverse, intercultural and inclusive. This is reflected in the education all over the world, which leads to intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education. In addition to employing traditional classroom teaching strategies, in order to introduce intercultural communication teaching, English teachers can use the teaching methods above to facilitate the integration of language teaching and intercultural communication instruction.

To sum up, by exploring the relationship between English teaching and intercultural communication, it is believed that the proposed writing strategies can be implemented to familiarize learners with a broader range of language skills, deepen their understanding of intercultural communication knowledge, and motivate them to examine the differences between Chinese and western cultures. In order to better reflect the value of intercultural communicative competence in writing instruction, teachers can apply "continuous written dialogue", "fill in information", "interview writing", and even translation practice properly. A few factors involved in cultivating learners' intercultural communicative competence in writing were also discussed. In short, to develop and further improve learners' intercultural communicative competence, we need at the least teachers' professional development and certain important ingredients in intercultural training, teaching methods integrated with intercultural communication, learners' autonomous learning, and support from the administration.

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